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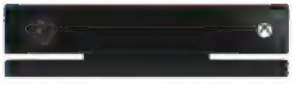

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Mass Effect In Full Effect

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

Read my column or comment on this letter at gameinformer.com/mag or follow @GI_AndyMc

Over the last year, our managing editor Matt Bertz has been working on an oral history of BioWare, because we believe that BioWare is one of the most important developers in the history of gaming. The studio helped define interactive role-playing games, and also led the charge in diversity, giving players choice and the power to define their own adventures (insert your own Mass Effect 3 ending rambling here, because I won't do it. I loved that game).

The resulting feature is a fascinating trip through the storied developer's past. It is also one of the most text-heavy features we have ever produced – and we have produced a lot of them.

We didn't plan to run the oral history in the same issue as our dive into Mass Effect Andromeda, but when the stars lined up, we simply couldn't miss the opportunity. Much like a BioWare game, you have two options in front of you, and you can decide which feature to read first. Also, in a Game Informer first, you get a cover featuring Scott or Sarah Ryder (Andromeda's new protagonist), highlighting BioWare's long-standing support of player choice.

I want to give Electronic Arts and BioWare props for making these two covers happen. Game Informer has long wanted to represent both of these character options on our cover and in our coverage of Mass Effect. I feel it is an important moment in how we communicate about games as publishers and developers realize that choosing between a male or female character is more than just a cosmetic decision; it is at the heart of how we see ourselves in the game and what the game represents to us as players. Hopefully, as games offer more choice, we can see that choice represented front and center, from the cover of the game to the cover of Game Informer.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

Our two glorious Mass Effect Andromeda covers

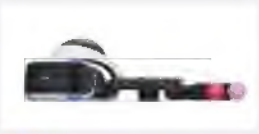
Visit gameinformer.com daily for the latest and greatest, and follow @gameinformer on Twitter

1216

50 Mass Effect Andromeda

With Commander Shepard's story concluded, BioWare is taking Mass Effect to a whole different galaxy. In Andromeda, players have new planets to explore, companions to meet, and decisions to make – all while experiencing familiar elements (like multiplayer) that made previous entries so popular. So step into the role of Ryder and find a new home for humanity in an alien frontier. ***by Joe Juba***

10 Introducing The Nintendo Switch
Nintendo's finally removed the NX code name and detailed its next system. It finds the middle ground between the home console and the handheld.



12 The PlayStation VR Review
Sony's entry into the world of virtual reality is here, and we reviewed it, alongside many of its launch games.

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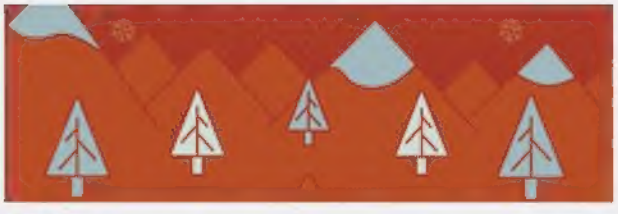
20 Doctors & Dragons: An Oral History Of BioWare
BioWare has been around for 20 years, and has built an impressive RPG legacy in that time. We detail the studio's history and how it has perserved.



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The season of gift-giving is upon us, and we have your guide to the best stuff.

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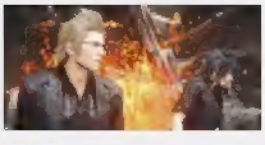
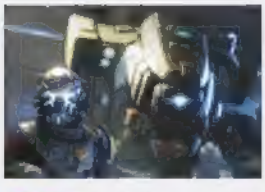
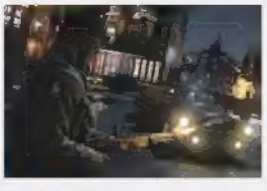
It's been six years since Rockstar explored the open-world old west, and it's finally ready to return.



68 Final Fantasy XV
The next Final Fantasy is coming soon, and we take one more look before offering our full review.



82 Titanfall 2
Will a single-player campaign help extend the shelf life of Titanfall?



83 Mafia III
Do the late '60s make for a compelling, open-world gangster story?

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feedback

New gaming technology was on many minds this month, while others ponder the holiday shooter landscape, and call out rude Call of Duty haters...with a little rudeness of their own.

Originality Is (un)Dead

I was looking through the previews section of issue 282, and I have to say not a single game in there looked even remotely interesting or new. Where are the fresh story ideas? Why does everything have to be a retread of the same old narrative? I've been a fan of the zombie genre for 34 years, but not everything is better with zombies. First Call of Duty and now Metal Gear? Give me a break! At least I can continue saving my money until something interesting comes along.

Shane Baldwin
via email

We can't blame anyone for suffering from sequel fatigue, especially when undead brain munchers are the big "new" addition (we're looking at you, Metal Gear Survive). To be fair though, issue 282 also previewed some pretty cool original experiences, including Horizon Zero Dawn, Prey, Scalebound, and Dragon Quest Builders...if you consider Dragon Quest + Minecraft original. Either way, we hope you find something in this month's previews and reviews to get excited about.

War Of The Words

This letter is for those two hate-heads who wrote in about Call of Duty (Infinite Woefare, issue 281). I know we all have our own taste in entertainment, but I don't care if people like them like COD or not. I like Call of Duty! I hope Battlefield 1 and DICE have a great year too, and I plan to be there on launch day. But Call of Duty has my interest because of its great, story-driven single-player campaigns. Last time I checked, Battlefield 1 has single-player "missions," not a campaign. I also hope Respawn has a great year too because, like Infinity Ward and DICE, they work just as hard to deliver a great experience. That is called *respect* – you two should try it sometime. By the way, I'm buying the Legacy Pro Edition of Infinite Warfare, which is basically like buying two standard copies – one for me and one for one of you turds!

Enrique V. Rivera
via email

You kinda undermined your call for respect with the whole "turd" comment at the end there, but otherwise we agree. Whether it's the venerable competitive multiplayer, the fleshed-out co-op options, or the off-the-wall campaigns, Call of Duty is still entertaining millions of fans, regardless of what the haters demand to see (or not see). Providing feedback to developers is fine, but don't make it personal – if you don't appreciate the hard work they put into their game, maybe it's because you're no longer the target audience.

Contact Us
feedback@gameinformer.com

Virtually Over 4K?

A lot of people are bashing Sony for not including 4K Blu-ray compatibility on the PlayStation 4 Pro. While I do think it's a strange thing to omit (even if it makes the console cheaper) I'm betting Sony doesn't care. I think Sony only put out the Pro to compete with Microsoft's Project Scorpio, but they will be focusing more on PSVR. After all, why would you care about your TV resolution when you have a pair of OLED screens sitting on your nose? Sony is clearly excited with their VR, announcing 50 launch titles for the thing.

Nathan Keeling
via email

While Sony is investing big in PSVR, we suspect the company considers 4K gaming equally important – especially given its position in the television business. That makes the lack of 4K Blu-ray support all the more perplexing, but we'll wait until we get our hands on the final versions of PS4 Pro and Project Scorpio before we make any judgment calls about either console. In the meantime, you can find out what we think of Sony's VR launch on page 10.

Memba This?

When the PlayStation 3 came out, Sony went full force with stereoscopic 3D technology. Unfortunately, 3D televisions were not affordable at the time, and most were active shutter, which made the glasses themselves not affordable. When I type "3D" in the PlayStation Store's search menu, a library full of choices show up on the PS3. When I try the same on the PS4? Nothing. Now that 3D televisions have come down in price and many are polarized, can we see a resurgence of the technology, or is it 3Done?

Stuart Barron
Atlanta, GA

While they may be hard to search for in the PlayStation Store, the PS4 does have a handful of games that support stereoscopic 3D (including Zen Pinball 2), though the selection is dwarfed by the PS3's offerings. 3D's early death has only been reaffirmed by the industry's new obsession with VR – which now faces an even more skeptical audience for that very fact.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Will there be a God of War and Dante's Inferno for the PS4?"

Yes and no, in that order.

"Is it company policy that the word 'myriad' is only to be used as an adjective in your magazine?"

There are myriad reasons to explain this, but we can't go into them.

"Can you PLEASE use something larger than 6-pt. font?"

No.

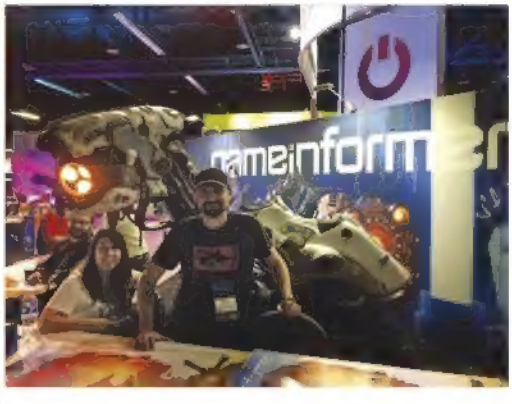
Worst News Tip Of The Month:

"Sorry, I am NOT a newb, but what's a news tip?"

Question Of The Month:

Alright, funny guy: Tell us your best video game-themed joke.

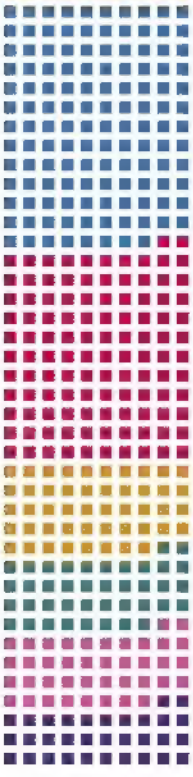
gi spy



PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

(Left) The G.I. crew traveled to BioWare's office in Edmonton, Canada, this month to learn all about Mass Effect Andromeda from the team leads. Canadians are so nice.
(Right) This year, Dan Tack, Elise Favis, and Andrew Reiner had to share G.I.'s Gamestop Expo booth with one of Horizon Zero Dawn's evil robots, but they weren't complaining. They were too scared to.

On Your Mind



- Gaming's Great Time-Wasters
- The Future Of VR
- Are 4K Consoles Worth It?
- Holiday Shooter Line-Up
- Long-Distance Gaming Love
- Bring Back Cheating!

Time Flies

In issue 282, we asked readers what game is their go-to time waster. Smartphone games were the clear winner, while others turn to competitive multiplayer and open-world sandboxes to pass the time.

My ultimate time-waster has got to be Minecraft. I cannot count how many hours I've spent goofing around in creative mode or challenging myself in hardcore mode. I always find myself coming back to it after I complete another game or during long dry spells for game releases. I love to check back in to see what new content Mojang and Microsoft have added to the game.

Tyler Keller

Team Fortress 2 is my go-to time waster, easily. Thousands of cosmetics to earn, hundreds of achievements to hunt for – the list could go on. Whether playing a few rounds with friends or solo-queuing all day long, TF 2 never fails to entertain me.

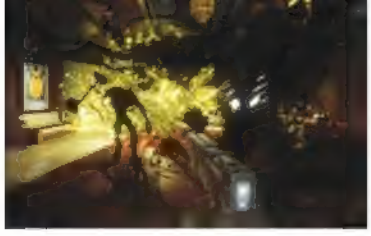
Brady Saylor

I have massive love for Gems of War. It's a great strategy game that doesn't require you to play for hours at a time (although it may end up that way). It's so fun and relaxing, I actually got my buddies playing it now. Even got my wife playing it!

Burt Hamernick, Jr.

I still play Clash of Clans, because demolishing tough bases is all the more satisfying when you know you are causing children to cry.

Pat Blaskopf



Let Us Prey

As a fan of the first Prey game and a guy whose dreams were dashed at the cancellation of Prey 2, I'm shocked to see the lack of buzz around the upcoming Prey reboot. I for one am absolutely elated to see the comeback of this series. Even though Arkane is taking Prey in a new direction, I'm ready to see what's coming along with it. From the preview in issue 282, it looks like I have a new game to save up for.

Nicholas Rios
via email

You're not the only one, Nicholas. Arkane's bold reimagining of the Prey series has us eager to find out what other kinds of strange alien abilities we'll have at our disposal while exploring Morgan Yu's derelict space station. Not that the ability to turn into a coffee mug doesn't already make Prey a must-buy.

Shooting For The Top

I have a question concerning the first-person shooter market this holiday season. What do the editors at G.I. think the best FPS is going to be this holiday? I personally think it's going to be Titanfall 2 because of the new single-player options, better leveling system, more customization, and new modes. What does G.I. think?

Brayden Valentine
via email

You're in luck, Brayden – we don't have to speculate on the shooters of 2016 any longer, as we've got reviews of Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare, Battlefield 1, Titanfall 2, and Gears of War 4 all in this issue. Head to page 92 to see how they fared.

(Left) Recently Dan Tack caught up with Twitch's Chase and Felix "PewDiePie" Kjellberg (Right) Andy and Miller show off the winning entries for our Destiny design-a-cover contest from artists Hernan Cerezo, Brian Moncus, and Steven Rivera.

(continued on page 8)

A SHOWDOWN FOR SKIN SUPREMACY

GEL
THE PROTECTOR
RESERVOIR

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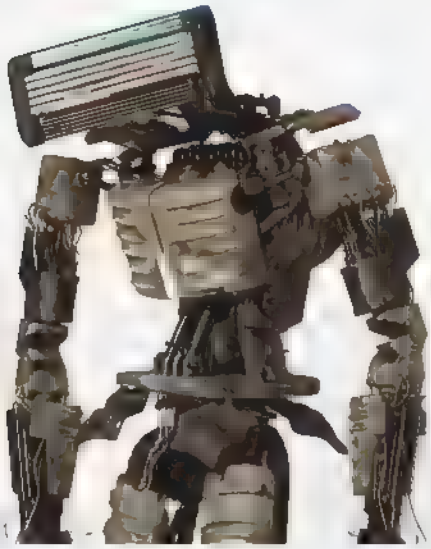

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*Average vs. Quattro Titanium lube strip

gallery

1 Jesse Campos
Amaterasu may be missing her regular splash of color, but she still looks pretty awesome.

2 Khava Albert
No hero has looked more adorable while saving the world than Toon Link.

3 Justin Roberts
Both Batman and the Joker look way too amused with what's going on here.

4 Jenny Theriault
It's hard to deny dipping into Mario's secret stash of fire flowers when you've got flames shooting out of you.

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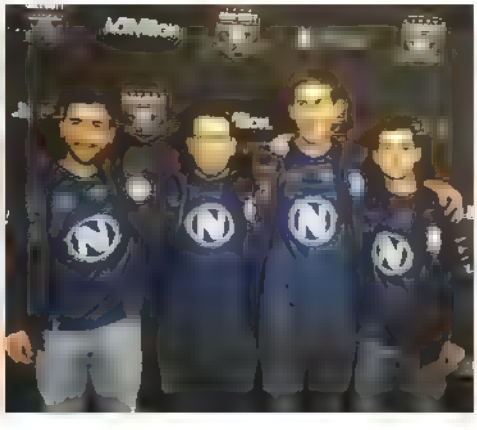
(Left) This year's Call of Duty XP event included a panel with Infinity Ward's Aaron Beck, John Dobbie, Thomas Szakolczay, and Brian Horton, and NASA JPL's Peter Meakin and Joby Harris.
(Right) The event also crowned the Call of Duty 2016 world champions: Team EnVyUs' Bryan "Apathy" Zhelyakov Austin "SlasheR" Liddicoat, Jordan "JKap" Kaplan, and Johnathon "John" Perez.



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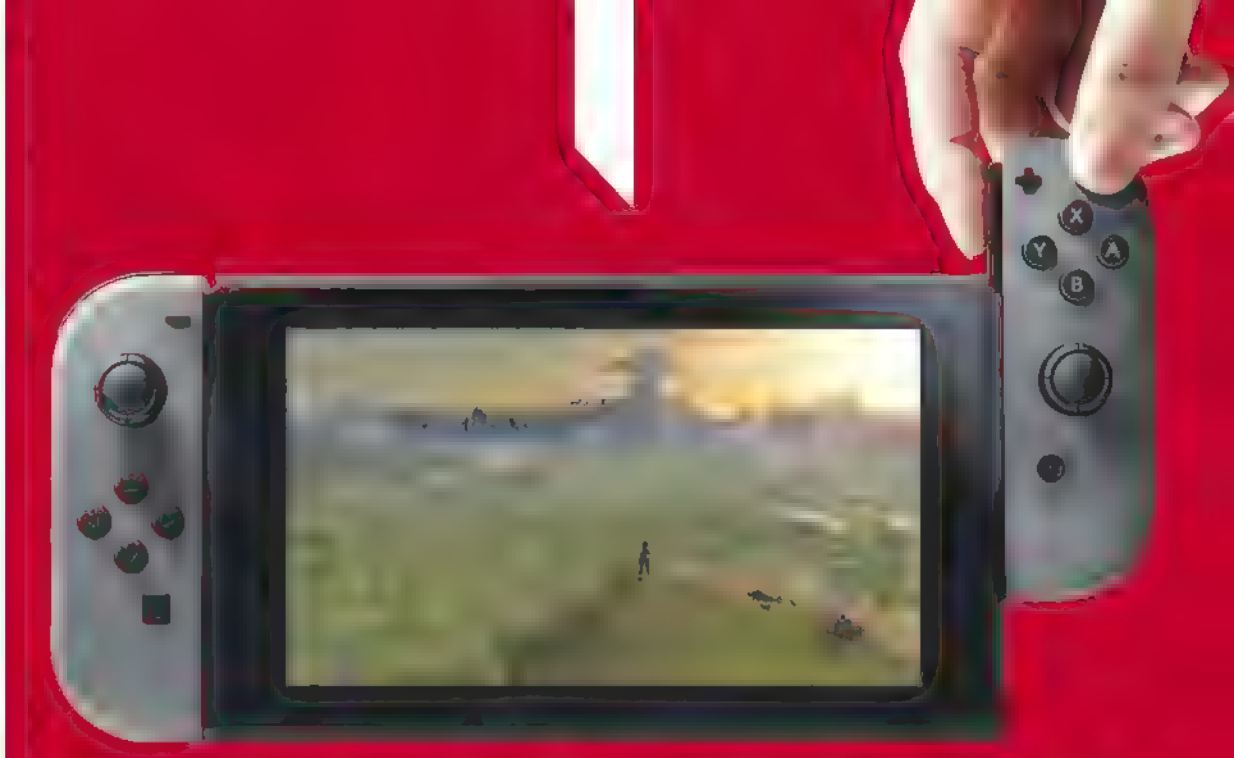

Introducing The Nintendo Switch

The new console/handheld hybrid enables gaming at home and on-the-go

Nintendo has willfully gone against the grain with its home consoles, whether through the proprietary cartridges for N64 at the boom of disc-based software, the motion-controls of the Wii, or the large controller screen of the Wii U. After many rumors and a teasing announcement of the NX in the spring of last year, Nintendo has finally revealed the first official details of its new system, called the Switch. Once again, the company is charting its own course.

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GAMING ANYWHERE

Unlike previous home systems, which were anchored to your TV, the Switch melds features from a traditional console and a more mobile handheld unit. Gamers can play a title on their TV and then continue that experience outside of the home courtesy of the Switch's nimble controller and portable screen.

At home, TV-based play requires the unit's screen (which Nintendo refers to as the Switch itself) to be placed in a dock connected to your TV. The two easy-to-detach sections of the Joy-Con controller can then be attached to either side of the Switch screen to enable gamers to seamlessly continue playing what they were just seeing on the TV via the Switch screen now in their hands (called Portable mode). Nintendo's introductory video for the console also showed the reverse: Being able to play a title away from home and then resuming where you left off once re-docking the screen.

The Switch's Joy-Con controller, which is wireless, resembles a traditional controller when assembled on the Grip "accessory" for home play. The left and right sections of the Joy-Con slide out of the Grip housing to either be attached to the Switch or used to control the game with a section in each hand. Two players can also each take a section of the controller, tipping them horizontal. Although both sections of the Joy-Con have their own panel of four face buttons, a shoulder button, a trigger, an analog stick, and other function buttons, whomever has the right section will have to deal with an analog stick that is more centered than the analog stick on the left section, which is more traditionally placed to the side. Whichever controller section you use, you have half the controls at your disposal. Nintendo has also announced an optional Switch Pro Controller, which is a single unit resembling a traditional controller.

Multiplayer was a big part of the Switch's reveal, showcasing local splitscreen multiplayer (with two players each using a Joy-Con section) in a Mario Kart title as well as playing with multiple Switch units and Joy-Con controllers. The system's reveal video showed two-player teams squaring off in an NBA 2K title and eight players competing in Splatoon using their own Switch units and Pro Controllers.

One interesting observation regarding the way Nintendo positioned the system in its debut is that for the first time in a while, the company appears to be marketing directly towards gamers. The video conspicuously lacks children or an older audience, which could be a turn for the company and its newest product.

9 VITAL QUESTIONS FOR THE SWITCH

How Much Will It Cost?
As exciting as the Switch's functionality is, plenty of details are still unknown. Scheduled to come out in March, we still don't have a specific date or price for the Switch. Nintendo specifically mentioned that the Switch's "product configuration" will be revealed later. We'll have to see if this simply refers to what's in the box or if there are bundles with different price points.

Will Nintendo Solve Its Network Problems?
How Nintendo handles the online network infrastructure for Switch – an area the company lags behind its competitors – remains to be seen. This is a big question mark considering it looks to be a critical component of the system's showcased on-the-go multiplayer functionality. Rational speculation says that online play relies on a Wi-Fi connection or data plan like tablets. We can only hope Nintendo's overall online philosophy finds parity with competitors' network services, from overall amenities and connecting with friends (via parties and chat functionality), to supporting online-centric games.

What Is The Battery Life?
Given that Joy-Con controllers can be taken anywhere, it will be vital to understand how long their battery charge lasts (the same goes for the Switch screen), and/or if they can be charged at all or run on independent batteries. There are green indicator lights on both the Switch dock and the Grip accessory housing the Joy-Con controllers, but it's unknown if this simply shows that it's connected or indicates that it's charging.

What About Game Storage?
The video shows a small card being placed in a slot labeled "game card" on the Switch screen unit. Whether the cards used in the slot can carry multiple titles, and the larger issue of how gamers will manage titles (physical and digital) for the system – including how much internal memory the Switch has – is still unknown. Hopefully Nintendo has learned from its early experience with the Wii U, when it expected gamers to curate their game library regularly.

How Powerful Is It?
The Switch is powered by a custom Nvidia Tegra processor, but can it compete or even surpass the current configurations of the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One? Epic has pledged Unreal Engine 4 support for the system, and games like The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim were shown in the video (see sidebar for more), but we don't know whether this was the original title from 2013 on the last-gen consoles or the new, remastered edition. Interestingly, Skyrim is the same game that Nvidia used to show off its Shield handheld in 2013 – a two-in-one game screen/controller that streamed games from a PC. The Shield line of streaming devices also used the Tegra processor, although they never took off. Perhaps Nvidia's experience with Shield can benefit Switch.

Will Third-Party Software Companies Support The Switch?
Arguably the largest question for the Switch is the same one that has been critically asked of most of Nintendo's home consoles: Will its third-party offerings be on par with those appearing on the other systems, thus making it viable competition? Because with its play-anywhere capabilities, being able to play the most recent triple-A title on the go could be a huge advantage.

What Else Does The Switch Do?
Gaming machines these days are rarely just that. They play movies, host content apps, and more. Nintendo has yet to detail what else the device may do outside of games. It's hard to tell if the Switch dock station or the screen itself has a disc slot, and if the Switch goes all-digital for its outside content playback (as well as any downloadable apps), then the question of internal and/or external storage becomes all the more important.

What About The 3DS?
Switch's melding of the traditional home console and a handheld raises the question of what is going to happen to Nintendo's handheld business. Traditionally the company has always stressed that handhelds and home consoles are two distinct branches, but the Switch clearly tests that divide like never before. Consumers would love having all of Nintendo's software concentrated on one platform, but given how successful Nintendo's handheld side has been it could be too profitable to give up just like that.

Is It Backwards Compatible?
This is unknown at this point. At a minimum, we assume the company will continue to make classic games available through its eShop. ♦

Companies Line Up To Support The Switch

What games will we play on the Switch? The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild has already been confirmed for the system, and was shown in the Switch reveal. Other first-party Nintendo titles were highlighted, but whether they were specifically Switch titles (as compared to merely examples used to demonstrate the system) remains to be seen. The Mario Kart and Splatoon series were displayed, as was a 3D Mario platformer. Co-op play was intimated for the latter, but not directly shown.

As for third-party games, many major companies are pledging support. The Switch reveal video prominently showcased Bethesda's The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim and an NBA 2K game. Interestingly, at the time of this writing Bethesda released a statement saying no specific titles from the company were actually confirmed for the Switch.

Apart from Skyrim in particular, hopefully the Switch does well enough out of the gates so we don't see a repeat like that of EA and the Wii U, where only four titles from the company appeared on the system. In general, it will also be important for Switch games to come out at the same time as they do for other platforms, as well as keep feature/graphics parity if the console wants to compete.

The Switch's launch lineup has not been announced yet, but here is the official list of third-party software and middleware companies supporting the system so far:

505 Games	GameTrust	NecoChea
Activision	Gearbox	Sega
Arc System Works	Manufacture	Silicon Studio
Atlus	Gungho Online Entertainment	Spike Chunsoft
Audiokinetic	Hamster Corporation	Square Enix
Autodesk	Hexik	Starbreeze Studios
Bandai Namco	Inti Creates	Take-Two Interactive
Bethesda	Koei Tecmo	Telltale Games
Capcom	Konami	THQ Nordic
Codemasters	Level-5	Tokyo RPG Factory
CRI Middleware	Marvelous	TT Games
DeNA	Mediatonic	Ubisoft
Electronic Arts	Meximan Games	Unity
Epic Games	Nippon Ichi	Unity Technologies
Firelight Technologies	Panty Bit	Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment
FromSoftware	Platinum Games	
Foxmebyte	RAD Game Tools	Web Technology Corp.

THE PLAYSTATION VR

REVIEW

Sony delivers the most affordable virtual reality option, but that comes with a performance loss

by Kyle Hilliard

The Oculus Rift and HTC Vive have enjoyed a healthy seven-month lead in the virtual-reality race. Sony stayed out of the early fight as it finished preparations for its home-console VR experience, but now PlayStation VR is stepping into the ring. It has a handful of exclusive titles and a cheaper (but still expensive) headset that might be more appealing to those still making a decision about whether to dive into this new medium of entertainment. In addition to its lower price point, PSVR has the potential to reach further than its competitors thanks to its plug-and-play nature. While it does have some technical limitations compared to the competition, Sony's headset still provides a legitimate virtual-reality experience with plenty of pros to balance out the cons.

The first question many have about PlayStation VR is how it stacks up to the Oculus Rift and HTC Vive, and the answer is as expected: PSVR is not as great as its main competitors. If you want to go all-in on virtual reality, money is no object, and you have an extra room in your house, then HTC Vive is the one I would personally recommend. That person is rare, however, and they probably bought a Vive back in April. The PlayStation VR lacks in resolution and controller-tracking, but the headset offers a genuine sense of presence in its worlds and experiences unlike anything you've ever played before in the console space.

The Setup
One of the biggest advantages of the PlayStation VR is its connection to the PlayStation 4. It does not plug into a PC, which means Sony has only had to account for one type of system. The headset comes included with all the cables you need, as well as a separate processing unit that looks a little like a miniature PlayStation 4. The processing unit requires its own power supply, so you have to make some room on your surge protector

The headset and the PlayStation 4 console connect to the processing unit, and the processing unit plugs into your TV. The PlayStation Camera stays plugged into the proprietary port on the back of the console. Once that's all set up, it's a matter of adjusting the camera so that it can see the headset, and you're ready. The initial setup process was reasonable, taking about 10 minutes. I took the headset in between home and our offices while working on the review and encountered few issues when having to unplug and plug it back in.

The Comfortability
The PlayStation VR headset is made of mostly plastic, but it is the most comfortable to wear of the three competitors. You slide the front and back of the headset apart to place it over your head as you would a hat. Once you have it in place, a knob on the back lets you tighten the headset in small increments. The back of the headset also has a button to release the tension when you're ready to take it off

The PlayStation VR keeps up with Oculus and Vive's refresh rates, but the screen has a lower resolution. It still looks sharp and is capable of delivering some impressive detail, but there is no denying that games look muddier in VR. This is true of all virtual reality – the games looks sharper on-screen than they do in-headset – but the gap between the visuals is larger in PlayStation VR.

The visor, which houses the screen, can be moved toward and away from your face. Unlike the competition, the PSVR does not entirely rest on your face, which is a good and bad thing. Since the visor is not pressed against your face, you can comfortably wear glasses. On the competing headsets, I have to remove my glasses while playing VR, which makes my vision significantly worse. Here, glasses are no problem.

The gap between your face and the visor also means your peripheral vision is not 100-percent obscured. You don't get a full view, but if you want to take notice of your surroundings or check your phone, you just press the button to pull the visor away from your face, and push it back when you're ready to start playing again A pass-through camera still would have been appreciated, but this a good low-tech solution for making sure you're at least somewhat aware of your surroundings.

The downside of the gap, however, has the potential to be a much larger problem Light leaking into the headset can break the immersion, especially when a game requires you to pull a brightly lit Move controller up to your face. I also became nauseated by PSVR often as the leaking light would sometimes reflect on the lenses inside the headset Playing in a dark room alleviates this problem, but it does not solve it.

A standard 1/8-inch headphone jack is embedded near a set of buttons that hangs by your chest while wearing VR, so wearing headphones is easy. The buttons turn PSVR on and off, control volume, and mute voice chat.

The Controllers
Many games use the standard DualShock 4 controller, and most cleverly superimpose the controller into the virtual space in front of you. The better way to play most of the games though, is with two PlayStation Move motion controllers. These controllers are comfortable, and seeing your two separate hands in a virtual space lends a much better sense that you're actually there.

The headset accounts for full 360-degree rotation by embedding sensors in the back, but the same can't be said for the controllers. The PlayStation Camera needs to see the light from your controller in order for it to function, so if you are facing away from the camera and your body blocks the camera's view to the controller, it can create a problem.

The London Heist

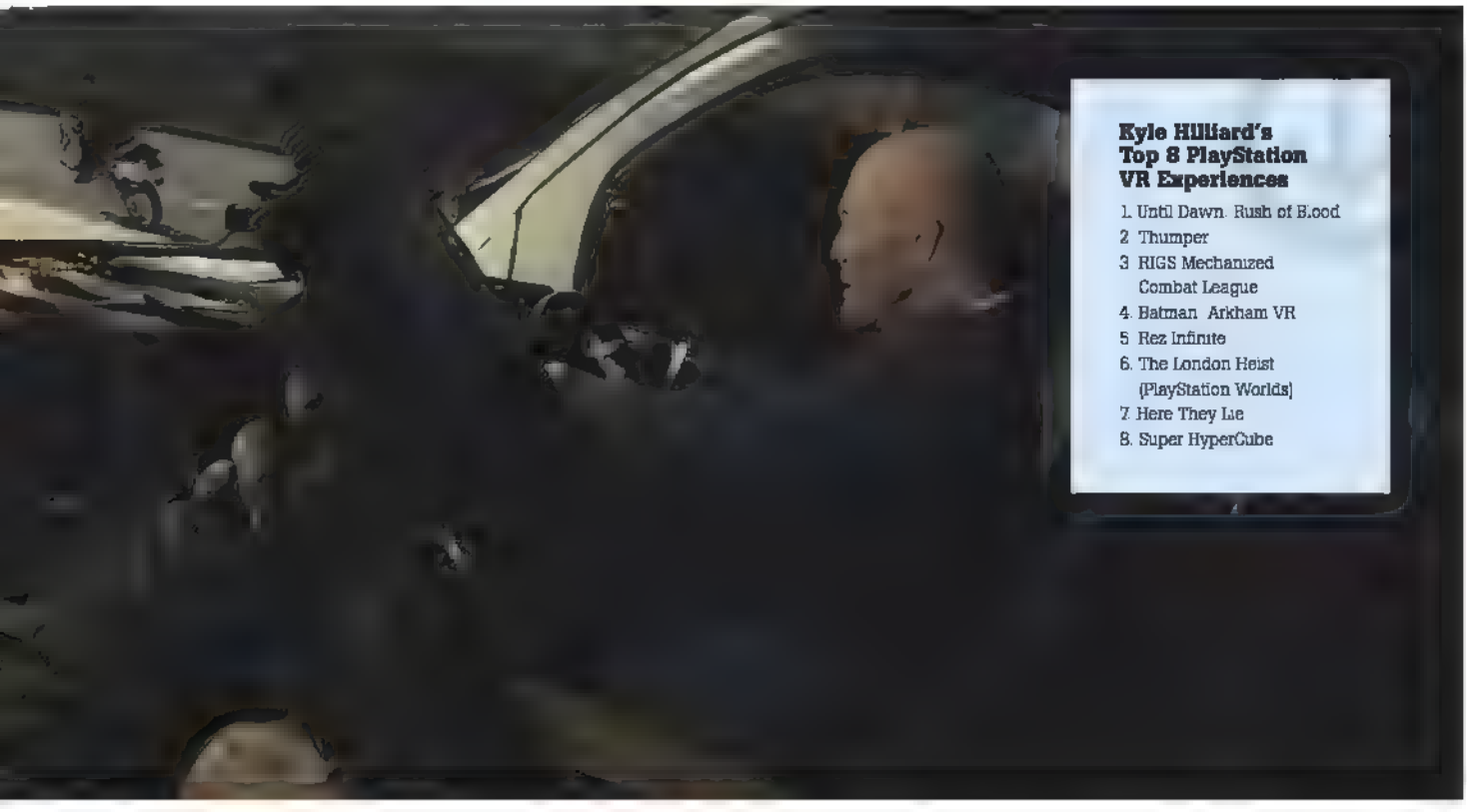
The Operating System
If you've used the PlayStation 4, then you already know what you're doing to when it comes to navigating in virtual reality. It basically displays the exact same U.I. on a large screen in front of you There's no need to sign up for a separate PlayStation VR account, or sit in a fake room to look through your games

Your normal, non-VR games can be played on this screen, but I wouldn't recommend it It basically takes your PlayStation 4 games,

The Cost

Consumers have a few different options when it comes to picking up a PlayStation VR, depending on how much of the hardware you already own. Despite the large price tag, Sony's VR device still comes in at a lower price that the Oculus Rift or the HTC Vive.

- **PlayStation 4 Console** - $299 - $399
- **PlayStation VR Launch Bundle** - $499.99
  PlayStation VR Headset
  PlayStation 4 Camera
  Two PlayStation Move controllers
  PlayStation Worlds game
  PlayStation VR Demo Disc
- **Standalone PlayStation VR Headset** - $399.99
  PlayStation VR Demo Disc
- **PlayStation 4 Camera** - $59.99
- **Two PlayStation Move Controllers** - $99.99



Kyle Hilliard's Top 8 PlayStation VR Experiences

1. Until Dawn: Rush of Blood
2. Thumper
3. RIGS Mechanized Combat League
4. Batman: Arkham VR
5. Rez Infinite
6. The London Heist (PlayStation Worlds)
7. Here They Lie
8. Super HyperCube

makes them look muddy, and displays them on a larger screen. In theory, the idea of playing your PlayStation 4 games on a giant virtual screen is appealing, but in practice it's like sitting in the front row of a bad theater. I only made it through one mission in Destiny before I was back to playing it on my normal television.

The Games

At the time of this review, we have not had a chance to try all of PlayStation VR's launch titles, but we played many of them. Each headset comes with a demo disc, which is a great conclusion for sampling a variety of new experiences. None of the games offer anything especially innovative in the world of virtual reality, but there are some standouts for those new to the medium.

Until Dawn: Rush of Blood was one of my favorites (you can find our full review on page 89). Its simplicity makes it a good game for diving into virtual reality. Its ties to the character-focused, narrative experience of Until Dawn from last year are tenuous, but as a scary action game where you shoot monsters it's fun.

Batman: Arkham VR is perhaps the biggest tease for the potential of VR. There are some very interesting moments when you get a real sense of being in Gotham City and doing the work of the World's Greatest Detective, but it's short, difficult to set up, and made me almost lose my balance on a few occasions. The head-tracking isn't as effective as some of the other games are (find our review on page 86).

Thumper is not a PlayStation VR exclusive game, but it ended up being another standout for me, even if Jeff Cork didn't share my enthusiasm (find the review on page 94). It's a rhythm game whose intensity is increased in VR. The pulsing soundtrack and bizarre visuals are hypnotic.

The PlayStation Worlds collection, which is basically a set of tech demos for PSVR, has a few impressive options. The London Heist is short, but features big action shootouts and angry British gangsters yelling in your face. I wouldn't mind seeing it expanded into a full game. The other experiences on the disc are simple, mostly passive experiences that are fun to look at once.

Scavenger's Odyssey, which is also on the PlayStation Worlds disc, is one you can investigate at your own peril. It looks great and has an interesting sci-fi conceit that has you jumping between asteroids in outer space in a mech, but it made me sick almost immediately. I can't place my finger exactly on what made me ill. It could have been having full control of the character's movement, or the antigravity mechanics that had you rotating to jump on vertical walls, but whatever it was, this is the sickest I've gotten by playing virtual reality.

The Nausea

Nausea levels are different for every player, so unfortunately I can't predict how it will make you feel, but PlayStation VR gave me the most issues between the three major VR headsets. First-person shooters have never given me issue, nor have intense rhythm games like Rez or Amplitude, but stereoscopic 3D has always given me a headache. Oculus and Vive usually leave me with a headache, but some extended PlayStation VR sessions gave me nausea alongside my normal VR headache. I mentioned Scavenger's Odyssey above, as well as some balance issues with Batman, but overall, the games that were well-designed left me feeling the same as when I play other headsets.

The Final Grade: C-

PlayStation VR falls into the same argument that has plagued the ongoing war between PC gaming and console gaming for years. By technical standards, Oculus and Vive on PC are stronger showcases for VR. However, PlayStation VR is cheaper, offers a legitimate virtual-reality experience with a more comfortable headset, and is easier to use than its competitors. For the console-exclusive gamers looking to enter the realm of virtual reality, PlayStation VR gets the job done. You can explore virtual worlds, get a sense that you're really there, and have new interactive gaming experiences unlike anything you've seen before on consoles. You just might have a little bit of a headache as a result.

Two Indie Platformers Explore Ruined Worlds

One of the great things about the indie game scene is watching so many talented development studios put their own twists on established formulas. In the case of the 2D action/platformer, we've seen a renaissance in recent years. This month, I spoke with the developers behind two of the most promising games on the horizon, both of which explore visions of a ruined world.

Sundered comes to us via Thunder Lotus Games. After completing Jotun, their sophomore project holds a lot of promise, exhibiting a stunning hand-drawn art style and a dark story setup that belies its colorful visuals. "Sundered is a horrifying fight for survival and sanity," says creative director Will Dubé. "You play Eshe, a wanderer in a ruined world, trapped in ever-changing caverns teeming with eldritch horrors. You must harness the power of corrupted relics to defeat gigantic bosses at the cost of your humanity." Eshe is a mechanic and scavenger who explores a bleak wasteland after a long-forgotten cataclysmic event. When she falls into a massive pit, she begins to uncover the history of that terrible catastrophe, simultaneously encountering nightmarish creatures inspired by the works of H.P. Lovecraft.

While the setting borrows from supernatural horror, the gameplay mixes platforming, combat, character improvement, and exploration in the vein of Metroid. But unlike a traditional game in that style, Sundered demands constant choices regarding your developing character. "As you progress throughout the game, you unlock new abilities that are either helpful in combat or in exploration," Dubé says. "You can corrupt these abilities at the cost of your sanity. Doing so has gameplay and story consequences and will influence which ending you get."

Sundered also distinguishes itself through its approach to level creation and structure, mixing crafted levels with procedurally generated elements. "In Sundered, the structure of the world does not change, similar to a game like Diablo, and new abilities will be required to access subsequent sections of the game," Dubé says. "Meanwhile, all sub-sections are procedurally assembled from hand-crafted levels to keep things fresh, while monsters are spawned randomly and dynamically throughout." By adding in elements of roguelikes, Sundered is aiming for deep replayability.

I'm intrigued by the aesthetics of Thunder Lotus' second game, and a Metroid-style game inspired by Lovecraft is right up my alley. The team is targeting a 2017 release on PlayStation 4, PC, Mac, and Linux.

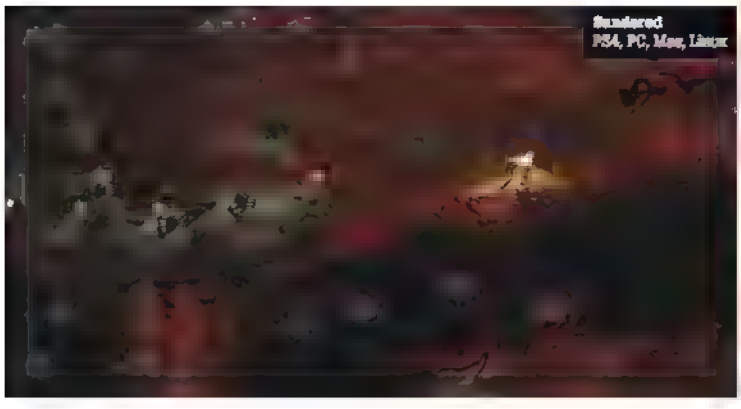
The new game from Videocult also explores a post-apocalyptic world, but from a much different perspective. **Rain World** casts players as a little lost slugcat trying to find its way home through the broken detritus left behind by a lost civilization. The creatures of this world must contend with deadly rain storms that sweep the surface, so there is fierce competition between prey and predators in the brief moments between storms.

"Visually it's hard not to see Rain World as a retro-inspired platformer, but other than the 2D perspective and the running and the jumping we think of it more along the lines of a survival game," says lead designer James Primate. "Rather than linear like a platformer, the game is open world, with a vast map of more than 1,400 rooms at current count, spread over 12 different regions that explore how the ecosystem plays out in different environments." Those zones range from farmland and shorelines to garbage swamps and cities.

Your slugcat has very limited abilities, and much of the game revolves around using those natural traits to navigate a complicated and ultimately mysterious world. "You are nimble and can use tools such as rocks and spears, but for the most part your strength lies in your ability to learn the world around you and observe the behaviors of the other creatures around you, using their strengths for your own ends, and playing them off of each other," Primate says.

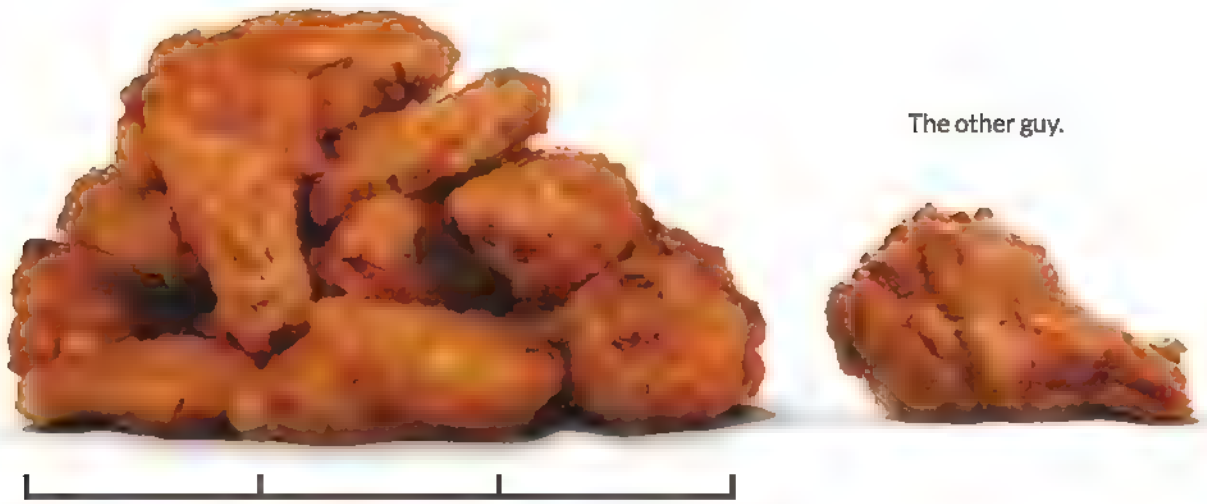
Within the massive playspace, Videocult aims to create a complete and active ecosystem. "A.I. predators and prey exist perpetually in the world, rather than spawning when the player comes near, and have freedom to move all over the map," Primate says. That means that the player must capitalize on territorial conflicts, navigate a world that wasn't built with slugcats in mind, and discover your creature's place in the food chain.

Rain World is aiming for a solo-oriented release on PS4 and PC in early 2017, but the team is also quietly crafting an update that adds both cooperative options and four-player competitive play further down the road.


Sundered
PS4, PC, Mac, Linux

Rain World
PS4, PC

GEICO



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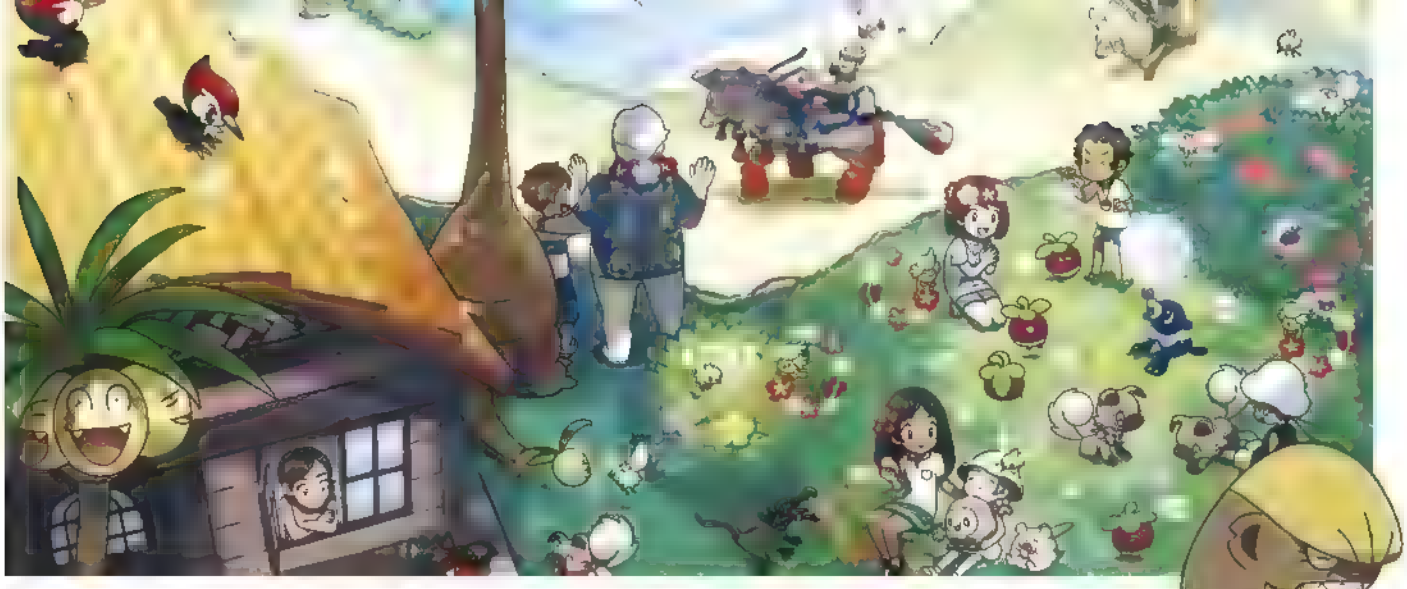


What's Next For Pokémon

We asked the series' longtime producer our burning questions

Pokémon Sun & Moon are nearly upon us, and there's a chance it may be the last core Pokémon on a handheld. We spoke with long-time producer Junichi Masuda and Sun & Moon director Shigeru Ohmori about the next entry in the series, and asked some of our biggest questions about the larger Pokémon franchise. *by Kyle Hilliard*

Is Yungoos/Gumshoos modeled after Donald Trump?

Junichi Masuda: It's a very American-centric question I think, and actually a lot of people sent me comparison photos on Twitter pointing out the resemblance. But we had started the design of this Pokémon a long time back, and we didn't have any intention to make it look like Donald Trump.

You can at least admit that the resemblance is pretty uncanny, right?

JM: Yeah, we were really surprised when I saw those photos. I can see why people would think it would look similar, especially the hair style.

We've only seen the original Kanto Pokémon in Alola forms. What's the reason for that?

Shigeru Ohmori: This is really my first time working as a director on a completely all-new title. Last time, Omega Ruby and Alpha Sapphire was kind of a remake of an older title. Also with this being the 20th anniversary, I was just thinking that we have so many fans – long-time fans of the game that have played since the beginning, and I really wanted to have a special surprise for those players. Also for the fact that Pokémon from the Kanto region of the original game are probably the most recognizable among long-time fans. So I really wanted to kind of focus on them and give them kind of a new take on their appearance to really surprise them. But at the same time, by having the new appearance they kind of look like new Pokémon for a lot of new players who are maybe just getting started with Pokémon. So that was the reason we decided to focus on Kanto Pokémon.

Have you been surprised by the success of Pokémon Go? And has any of that game's success factored into the development of Sun & Moon?

JM: First, with Pokémon Go, I personally didn't expect it to be the big phenomenon it has become. When we were first beginning the development of the game, I really just kind of expected that a lot of people would play it, but as a smaller thing, where people would just enjoy going outside and catching some Pokémon. That was really actually where we put the focus of the game. We really wanted to kind of distill the experience of catching Pokémon, make it a simple experience, you can go outdoors specifically, walk around, find Pokémon, and catch them. I really just wanted to kind of express that concept with the Pokémon Go application.

And because of that we took Pokémon Go – we knew from the beginning, that was the direction of the game and with Sun and Moon, we wanted it to be more of a deep experience, that people would spend a lot more time enjoying the game, not just catching Pokémon but also raising them and getting into battling. Really just being immersed and enjoying the Pokémon universe. In terms of whether Go's success affected Sun & Moon? It didn't affect the development of the game, or any of the features, but I think it's going to affect it in a way that, more people, for example, maybe just learned about Pokémon, or came back to Pokémon through Go. I think the awareness of Pokémon in general is a lot higher, so that may affect Sun & Moon in a certain way.

With Switch launching next year and whatever that could mean for handheld Nintendo consoles, will Sun & Moon be the last Pokémon games for 3DS?

JM: When it comes to the main series, thinking of Pokémon RPGs that we develop at Game Freak, we always really considered the timing of when we released them. There has to be a certain point where we're able to release the games and get them into the hands of enough people, to make sure the audience is big enough. This year, with Pokémon Sun & Moon, obviously we're going to be starting to think about the next title, and then depending on what that timing is, I think that will determine which platform we would release it on.

Have you ever forgotten the name of a Pokémon?

JM: We definitely forget a lot of Pokémon names quite a bit. One of the reasons for that is while developing the game we call all the Pokémon by code names. So it would be years where those kind of take hold. We often don't remember the final names of the Pokémon. We definitely remember their code names.

A lot more Pokémon are based on inanimate objects like Klefki and the sand castle and the lei from Sun & Moon. Are you running out of animals?

JM: I don't really feel we are running out of material, especially with the series as it has progressed. We've tried to find more of a fine balance of creatures that may look like they could be typical animals and also more Pokémon based on inanimate objects. I don't feel like we're running out of material or ideas anytime soon, but I think it's the result of trying to find that balance.

The Good

OCULUS is working on a new wireless VR headset that is more affordable and portable than the current configuration (which runs for $599 sans Touch controllers). The device is being prototyped, and is intended to be a step up from budget offerings like Gear VR. No official price for this new Oculus unit has been announced.

The Bad

SLEEPING DOGS AND MODNATION RACERS developer United Front Games has closed its doors. The Vancouver, studio was in the early access period for Smash+Grab (shown) at the time of the closure.

The Ugly

ON STRIKE!
INTERACTIVE VIDEO GAMES

VOICE ACTORS and other video game performers from the SAG-AFTRA labor union are on strike as of the time of this writing for projects that started after February 17, 2015. The union and prominent video game publishers such as Electronic Arts and Activision are locked in a negotiation over working conditions, bonus structures, and other workplace issues.

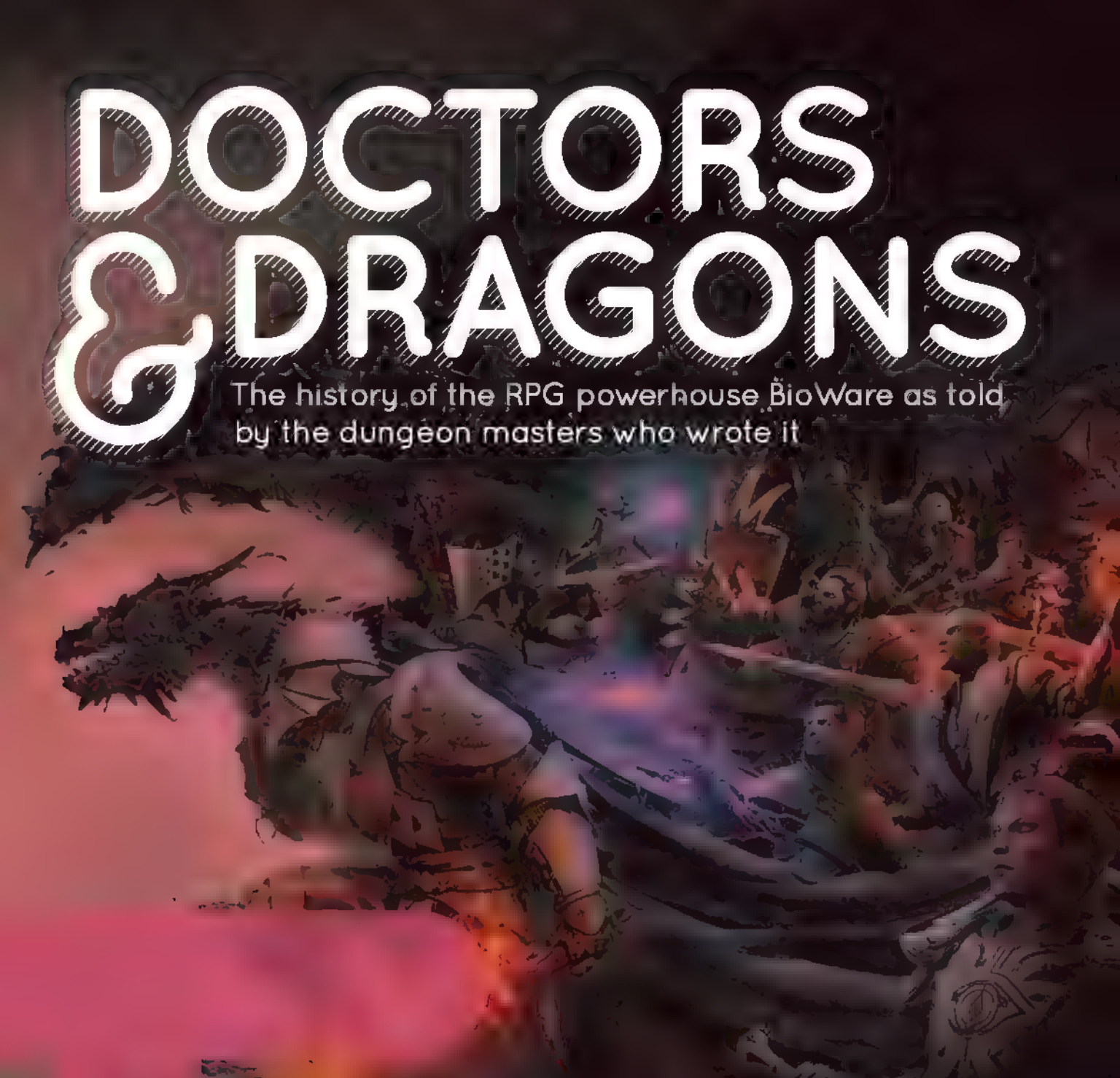
Quotable

"We wanted planet exploration, space travel, cities... All this was also supposed to be in [the original Beyond Good & Evil]... Instead of not doing the game of our dreams, we decided to return to 2D, have fun with Rayman, and go back at work for Beyond Good and Evil 2."

— Creator **Michel Ancel** explains what's taken so long to make BG&E 2 (now officially in pre-production), and gives a taste of what it may look like

DOCTORS & DRAGONS

The history of the RPG powerhouse BioWare as told by the dungeon masters who wrote it



Twenty years ago, Dungeons & Dragons was considered by many to be a Satanic game played by mentally imbalanced adolescents, and role-playing games were a fringe genre in video games. That was the reality when two doctors decided to start up a game development studio on the side of their medical practice back in the mid '90s. Fast forward two decades, and BioWare stands as one of the pillars of a genre that has since become a destination for millions of players and infected nearly every other type of video game, from sports games to shooters.

With franchises like Baldur's Gate, Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic, Mass Effect, and Dragon Age the studio put storytelling at the forefront of the role-playing experience in a way that changed the genre forever. To commemorate the studio's long-standing commitment to excellence, *Game Informer* interviewed several BioWare developers, past and present, along with several other noteworthy industry figures who worked alongside them, to recollect how an unassuming studio in the far-flung Canadian prairies managed to become RPG royalty.

by Matt Bertz

Ray Muzyka
Greg Zeschuk

Mark Darrah

Brian Fargo

Aaryn Flynn

Casey Hudson

Mike Laidlaw

Kevin Martens

James Ohlen

Feargus Urquhart

Preston Watamaniuk

BioWare founders Augustine Yip, Greg Zeschuk, and Ray Muzyka show off their first two game releases, Baldur's Gate and Shattered Steel

THE ORIGIN STORY

Growing up in Canada in the '70s, Ray Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk are exposed to video games at an early age. Titles like Pong, Castle Wolfenstein, and Pirate's Cove capture their imaginations and compel each to take up programming as a hobby. Their paths first cross in college.

Greg Zeschuk: Both Ray and I went to University of Alberta in the late '80s. We were in inorganic chemistry together, that was the first class we met each other. Then we went to med school together, and that's where we got to know one another. Ironically, we bonded over the foosball table.

Ray Muzyka: We also played a lot of video games. It was a common passion. We started doing some medical-education projects, too. We're both self-taught programmers. So we signed up with our third co-founder of BioWare, Augustine Yip, who's a doctor as well. He left BioWare pretty quickly after we incorporated to go full-time practice in Calgary, but we started the company together.

Muzyka: We named the company BioWare – software for humans. It was a play on words that there are three doctors kind of working together.

Zeschuk: We used to have one guy that since the beginning told us it was terrible.

Muzyka: There were a lot of people that told us that. Some people, their names will be not mentioned, told us we would never build a brand. I remember that very clearly, there was one meeting that we had. . [laughs].

Zeschuk: It's a circular reference for our future owner, but not anyone relevant.

Muzyka: We did medical-education software projects together, like an acid-based physiology simulator. We understood it was a pretty tough market to get in.

Zeschuk: People don't want to pay for education or health, especially in Canada, so when you combine the two…it's very difficult. Then we realized, okay, let's try games.

Hiring in Edmonton, no one had ever really worked on a game before. So we had all of these video game noobs that were just trying to figure it out.

Muzyka: James Ohlen is another great example. He was running a comic book store in Grand Prairie, a small town in northern Alberta. We hired him because we heard from other guys in that area that there was this guy up there running a D&D campaign with a waiting list. He was running this comic book store so he could only run two campaigns, but he had a waiting list and as soon as anyone would drop out people couldn't wait to sign up.

Zeschuk: And he traded his Magic cards for a car so he could drive to work.

Muzyka: We originally set up in Greg's basement. That was our first office. Scott Greig went to the basement for an interview and he was ready to run out of the room. He was like, "Are these guys for real? Two doctors want to start up a video game company for some reason?"

Zeschuk: I think people thought it was a phase. Even for us, on some level we thought we'd go back to being doctors.

Muzyka: I didn't think that at the time. Obviously that would have been the case, but it wasn't part of the thinking process because I was too dumb to realize the business might not succeed. We didn't take a salary for five years at BioWare either, so the fact that we could work once a month as a doctor and buy soup and beans and pay off our maxed-out credit cards and lines of credit and our mortgages and stuff was helpful. For me, anyways. I couldn't have survived without that. It was a pretty tough existence, but it was fun.

Zeschuk: We were young, so the resistance to that stuff was higher.

Rather than start small with one project, the scrappy team works up two game concepts simultaneously, a mech combat game called Shattered Steel and a role-playing/strategy game code-named Battleground Infinity. The doctors begin shopping for a publisher.

Muzyka: We made a list of the top 10 publishers worldwide at the time. I think only one of them is still around. We divided it into two and started cold-calling them, over and over, until they started taking our calls. I think we got almost all of them to start making an offer.

Zeschuk: They had these giant piles [of games] they never looked at, but since we kept bugging them they'd be like, "Fine, fine, we'll look at it." Shattered Steel in particular was really good technology for the time – 3D objects in a 2.5D space.

Muzyka: Nine out of ten publishers made an offer on a demo from two doctors and an unknown team from Canada based on a twenty-page business plan and a relatively crude prototype.

Brian Fargo: I met them when they presented the Shattered Steel project to us. They wanted to take on MechWarrior from Activision, and they had a great little demo. Super passionate, super detailed, and I was impressed with their knowledge of the category and their approach.

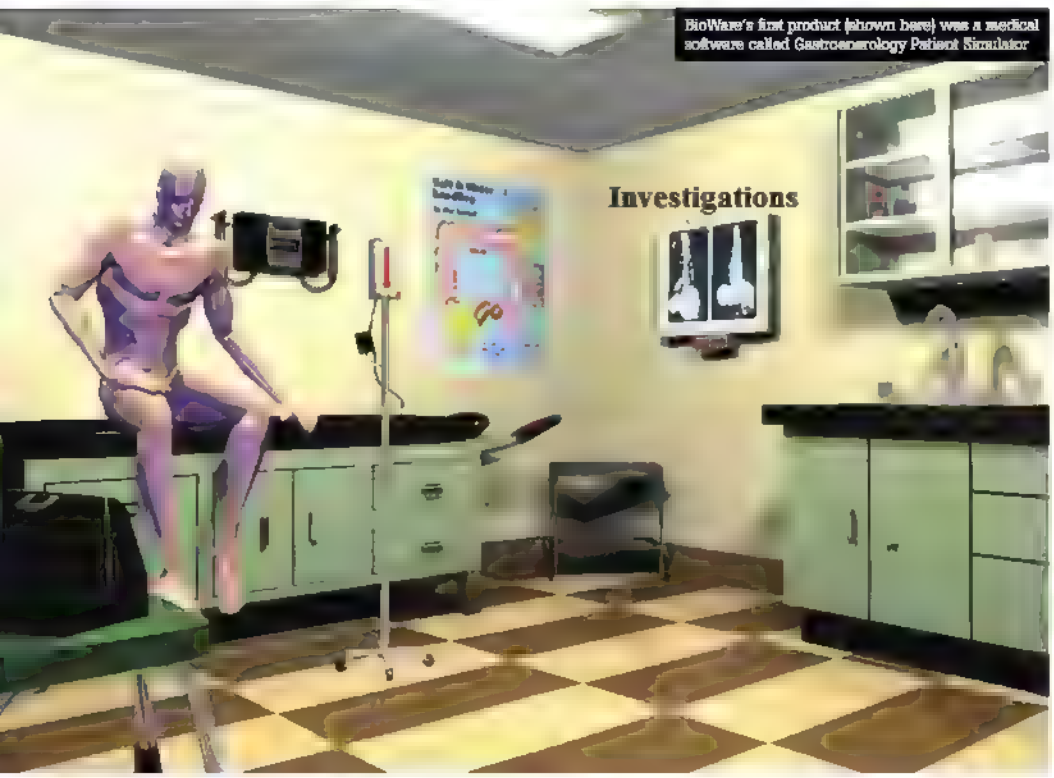
Feargus Urquhart: I thought it was super cool that Ray and Greg were incredibly involved in not just the managing, but in the development itself. Greg wrote one of the tools that was used to get the models in the engine.

Muzyka: Story and character were a big part of what we did from the beginning. That wasn't popular, a lot of people were saying it was a bad idea. Even Shattered Steel, it was an action game but we added story to it in a way that wasn't common at the time. We had a story arc that went through and tried to explain everything. It was bolted on near the end, but for us that was important. It made the world complete.

Zeschuk: I think closing [Shattered Steel] was sort of surreal because we had never done it before, we didn't know what to do. I think the biggest thing was willingly we always strove to learn something from what we did. We had no QA, no testing, so everyone was just playing it. The whole idea of crunch time and working really hard, it was actually really exhilarating.

Muzyka: Caffeine-fueled mania. It reminded me a lot of being on call as a doctor, too.

Zeschuk: When we actually finished it, it was remarkable. We'd often lurk in stores, wait, and watch someone actually buy the game we made.



BioWare's first product (shown here) was a medical software called Gastroenterology Patient Simulator

CRITICAL STRIKE

During the development of Shattered Steel, BioWare was also shopping its role-playing game, code-named Battleground Infinity. Interest originally proved tepid.

Muzyka: Some of where we came from was almost rebellious. We loved role-playing games growing up, and our desire was to try something no one else was doing. I think that benefited us because we weren't trying to tackle a red ocean. There was a big opportunity there, but people were saying role-playing games were dead, that we wouldn't ever succeed. We heard that so many times.

Urquhart: They came up with the idea of Battleground Infinity. It was all about the gods. There were a ton of different gods, like an RPG and an RTS smashed together. That's why Baldur's Gate has this view and control mechanism, I think, because Battleground was more of an RTS.

Initially, what they sent me wasn't enough for me to think we wanted to do another game with them at the time. Thankfully, they continued to work on that demo and had been presenting it to Westwood and Sir Tech.

Zeschuk: We mentioned to Feargus that, "Hey, we were just down the street [pitching the game] at Virgin." He was like, "Can I take a quick look at it?" So we go over, and he goes, "Hold on."

Urquhart: During all this, Interplay had signed the Dungeons & Dragons license. So I said to them, "What about this being a D&D game?" They said, "That would be super cool." This is big business talk back then. I said, "Let me see what I can do." It was a little challenging, and my boss at the time actually thought it was a stupid idea. So I brought in the VP of marketing and I sold her on it. She brought Brian Fargo and he looked at it for like three minutes and said, "Sign it up."

The BioWare Timeline

1995

1998

1998

Fargo: With D&D, I felt that if I could get the developer that really understood and appreciated the roots and really focused on the detail of the experience, that we could do something with it. And that's what [BioWare] offered. When they showed me their product, I remember visually it showed a lot of promise.

James Ohlen: That tech became the basis for Baldur's Gate.

Muzyka: I always thought of Baldur's Gate as a strategy/RPG. We merged in some strategy elements. We looked at control mechanics of games like Command & Conquer and Warcraft II. We looked at the character interactions of Jagged Alliance from SirTech – they would react to things you did. So that element made it into the game as well. I think we came up with the control-mechanic formations on our own, but it was based on some stuff we saw in strategy games. Combine that with the best-of-breed RPG fundamentals...and that was what pulled it together. And D&D obviously. We wanted to make it feel like you were playing D&D with your friends.

Kevin Martens: I think that's the secret thing and I still recommend to this day, if you don't play pen and paper as a dungeon master you're not going to be a good game designer. That's where you learn. If you can keep people coming back to your kitchen table every Sunday afternoon time after time and they can't wait to learn what happens next, you're learning game design no matter how informally you're learning it.

As the team raced toward its scheduled release date, BioWare and Black Isle Studios ran into roadblocks. Baldur's Gate wasn't ready for its planned release date, and the marketing department didn't want to waste money promoting it because role-playing games were still considered niche.

Baldur's Gate

Fargo: If you shipped on December 21, you've really missed Christmas, right? Because you're not in most other retail channels. So we sort of sucked it up and said, "Look, this thing has way too much promise." Our reputation was always paramount, so we didn't want to shove something out the door, so we absorbed that hit and gave them the extra time to get it right.

Urquhart: Dungeons & Dragons was a brand no one believed in anymore. We were working with this idea that the [Baldur's Gate] sales forecast was 70,000 units in the U.S. and the sales forecast for Europe was 0. The challenging thing about that is that sales forecasts are where you get your marketing budget. Interplay at the time did these big sales meetings where we'd bring sales reps and the actual buyers and have all these presentations, something of a boondoggle, but I went to Brian and said, "I need you to tell people Baldur's Gate is going to be awesome. They need to hear it from you." So he did. He really sold it.

Fargo: If you wouldn't launch a company around the title, you probably shouldn't be doing it.

Urquhart: At the time, CompUSA was being a big pain in the ass. We told them, "This product is going to be huge." They were like, "We don't care."

Muzyka: Diablo came out, and that was one of the first good RPGs in a while. Then Baldur's Gate came out soon after. Both of those had been in development while everyone was saying, "Let's not do these." They kind of died because they stopped being fun and when you release games that are, all of the sudden, hey there's an audience for these again.

Urquhart: At the Christmas party in '98 I was talking to Brian Fargo, who said, "I've got a funny story for you. I had the CEO of CompUSA call me to ask for units." Because they took none, and everyone was selling a ton, he said, "Will you please give us units? You don't have to pay, provide end caps, anything like that. We just need units." The funny but sad part of that was that the CompUSA buyer who did that to us, they actually fired.

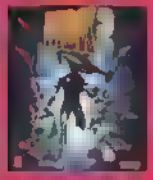
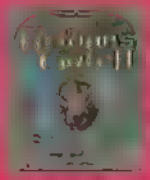
Muzyka: I don't think any of us really had any idea it would sell the millions of copies that it did in the end.

Zeschuk: We didn't know what it sold. It took a while to get royalty checks because they are delayed based on the publisher getting paid. It was quite a while before we realized how big Baldur's Gate was. We started winning a bunch of awards.

Muzyka: At the same time, both of us still practiced medicine. I did more ER and family med and Greg did some ER, family, and geriatric work. I practiced for two years full-time before we incorporated BioWare.

Zeschuk: I just remember one day, I was on call at the geriatric hospital, and going, "Wait a minute. I worked at BioWare all day. Here I am, laying in the hospital. Why on Earth am I doing this?" That was the moment for me when I realized it. It's interesting because that came after Baldur's Gate was successful. By the time we knew it was huge, we actually were still working in that cross-over period. I decided to retire at that point.

Muzyka: I think Greg retired from medicine a year or two before me.



2000

2002

"We had this long-term vision that we wanted to make and capture the D&D experience."

Ray Muzyka on Neverwinter Nights

POTION OF FORTITUDE

Following the commercial and critical success of Baldur's Gate, BioWare transitioned one team immediately into the Tales of the Sword Coast expansion, while three other teams started work on Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn, Neverwinter Nights, and the studio's first console game, MDK2.

Aaryn Flynn: The ambition for Baldur's Gate II was incredibly high, so we had lots of pressure on us to deliver that.

Muzyka: We targeted several areas for improvement: Improve the user interface, improve the graphic resolution, tighten the story, obviously extend it so you could carry your character you imported to a higher level, and still start a fresh character if you wanted.

Zeschuk: I think the biggest thing with that game was we didn't make almost any engine changes. A lot of times when doing quality assurance, you're changing fundamental structure and have to start from square one. But with BG II we literally picked up right after BG I, kept a similar technology base, and just kept chugging with it.

Martens: We just wanted to do more. What I realize now – I'm 18 years in – is just how lucky we were to have a super stable engine. We could hit the ground running. We had very few new features for Baldur's Gate II that stopped development at all.

Flynn: After BG, James [Ohlen] was very proud of the reviews of the story coming in. But this fellow Diarmid Clarke gave him a dose of humility when he told him that FFVII characters were so much better-developed.

Ohlen: I'm very competitive, and SquareSoft was killing it with the Final Fantasy series. They were doing a lot of things better than us in how they built up characters, made people love them, romances, all the rest. So that was a big inspiration for Baldur's Gate II. I really wanted to take the crown away from SquareSoft as the studio that did the best story, the best characters, all that.

Martens: My story of James is that he has always had a vision grander than anyone else around me. Here was this kid in Edmonton, Alberta, trying to take down the long-time kingpin of RPGs. That's not possible, right?

Flynn: So much of what we did back then, the eagerness was 80 percent of it. It was less about what you knew, because no one knew anything at the time. What the hell did folks in Edmonton know about how to make computer games other than they made one or two at that point?

Ohlen: In Baldur's Gate, the stories were quite simple. The characters got introduced in the main storyline and their personalities were developed through the barks they had, and they were quite dumb. For Baldur's Gate II, we reduced the number of characters because we realized we wouldn't have the time to do a storyline for the same amount of characters. But we gave every single companion in BG II their own area and story that introduced them, so they were key characters in the major storylines.

Martens: The biggest challenge of it was we wanted to represent a lot of different viewpoints, because you could be any character. The challenge of BioWare storytelling in that era was you could be anybody from anywhere, any class, any gender that's available in D&D, and by the time we were done you could even be any subclass. But somehow the story had to work for all of these. It was the same thing with romance – how do you write one romance like how Final Fantasy might do for a game with a character that could be any character of any gender?

2003

2005

2007

Flynn: The QA for that game was nuts. What we lacked in discipline we made up for in energy and passion for what we were doing.

Martens: Some of the memories that stand out for me were seeing how fast we could get through the game. We figured we had about 150 hours of content, but we kept adding it right until the end because there was no reason not to since you didn't have to wait for VO or all that stuff. We ended up with about 240 hours, and then we would race the critical path to see how fast we could finish it. I think the fastest we ever got through it was 1 hour and 58 minutes.

Fargo: I still think it's probably one of the biggest RPGs of all time in terms of number of quests you can do.

Martens: Everybody felt the aftermath, everybody had a down period at the end or a recovery period – whatever you want to call it. James used to sleep under his desk. He actually wouldn't go home. Someone would bring him clothes from home, he wouldn't even go home to change, he would get one of his roommates to bring it over. Because three of the four people he had lived with worked at BioWare. That's probably too far. I don't think James felt that way at the time, and I don't think it affected his life, but he didn't have a child at that time. I felt something was wrong with crunch back then, but I didn't know any other way to do it. And I have to admit we brought a lot of it on ourselves by making plans that were grander than the staff we had or the knowledge we had to do it.

Ohlen: It was the most fun I ever had as a game developer.

Baldur's Gate II shattered expectations and earned massive critical acclaim; it still ranks sixth on Metacritic's list of the highest-rated PC games of all time.

SOLO QUESTING

Following the success of Baldur's Gate II, BioWare was in the midst of its most ambitious project to date. On top of an original campaign built on the 3rd edition Dungeons & Dragons rules, Neverwinter Nights offered a full set of editing tools so players could create their own modular experiences, plus an online infrastructure for questing with friends. During development, problems arose at Interplay.

Flynn: Neverwinter was a very challenging development. It was our first 3D role-playing game.

Zeschuk: The vision for Neverwinter was very clear right from the beginning: toolset, DM client and game – these things were just a huge undertaking. It was a big, complicated game.

Muzyka: It was part of the core vision right from the start to enable user-generated content. We had this long-term vision that we wanted to make and capture the D&D experience. We felt that enabling someone to be a dungeon master, to have control over it in real time in a multiplayer or single-player setting, and allow users to make content to expand the universe out would be part of it. Then we would have a curated online store where we would present the best of the user-generated content for other players to see. Trent Oster, the project director, had a grand vision for NWN that encompassed all of these game pillars; it was definitely an ambitious game.

Zeschuk: I would say one of the biggest financial risks we took was paying for Neverwinter Nights. That was a big dice roll.

Flynn: We always had this ability to convince ourselves, "Ah, ambition smambition, we'll get it done."

Muzyka: We talked with Will Wright, who talked about the pyramid of user-content creation in The Sims. That was one of the inspirations for sure. You had this community that had a lot of players, and a certain number of people that got involved in the online aspects, and a certain number of players that would make things, and the certain number that would make really complex, interesting things. So we were trying to create that, enable the players to have that power in the Neverwinter setting and a D&D setting. We thought, "This has never been done before."

Ohlen: It was kind of disappointing because we just knocked it out of the park with Baldur's Gate and Baldur's Gate II, and then all of a sudden, Neverwinter Nights was in danger because Interplay was blowing up.

Muzyka: We hadn't been paid any of the royalties [for Baldur's Gate II]. We were owed a lot of money.

Fargo: BioWare was a little out of money, and probably one of the biggest creditors at Interplay. I remember saying, "Hey we've got to do something clever to get these guys paid."

Zeschuk: There's actually quite a dramatic business story behind the whole transition. When the wheels fell off at Interplay, there was a pretty ambitious deal brokered with so many people involved – us, Interplay, and was it Infogrames or Atari at the time?

Muzyka: Infogrames first and then Atari, they had a name transition halfway through. Then Titus [who acquired Interplay] was involved, as well as Wizards of the Coast and TSR.

Zeschuk: The business side was like threading a needle. I mean we were in negotiations every couple days for six months.

Neverwinter Nights

2007

2008

2009

Ohlen: It could have gone really wrong. Neverwinter Nights was like, "If we make this and it isn't successful, that's the end of the company."

Darrah: We were probably within months of having no money. .but it never really seemed to be reflected in in the culture itself Everyone was really focused on making the games themselves.

Muzyka: It got resolved amicably n the end, but we launched a lawsuit to get paid the royalties we were owed and to protect Neverwinter.

Martens: The day that we got the dea with Atari, they gathered the whole company together and told them we had a new publisher Everyone had a very big cheer

Watamanuik: Neverwinter Nights was a very stressful project. I did a lot of crunch on Neverwinter; it was like six months where I didn't get to see my wife very much.

Ohlen: I was working on Knights of the Old Republic at the time, but the executive producer on Neverw nter Nights at the time, Trent Oster, was like, "You got to come over here and take over the project and make sure it's actually successful." I had to put my work on KOTOR on hold, go to Neverwinter Nights, take all the writers from across the studio and work on getting Neverwinter Nights out the door

Martens: Everybody ended up on Neverwinter to ship that again. I think that's the last game where we did that, where the whole company had to ship the game.

Watamanuik: I was really happy with how close we were able to map the game to the actual Dungeons & Dragons rule set.

Flynn: It was really cool once we got stuff out there and we saw people making it. Every week something would go around the office and you would go, "Wow, look at this "

Darrah: It definitely had a long legacy, and it arguably has probably shaped a lot of what we see today in terms of RPGs with toolsets and trying to have these very long, user-supported tal s.

Zeschuk: Every once in a while you go across these kind of what-if scenarios and you go, "What if we actually kept on going in that direction?" If you look forward past that, we've shifted harder toward story, but we've shifted away from that user-generated content... It's someth ng I wish we had pushed harder, but you only have so many resources and you have your focus and perspective at the time.

Ohlen: I used it as the most powerful hiring tool I ever had. I kind of miss it. The guys who I would bring in were able to do ridiculous things with the tools like, "How the hell were they able to do that?"

Watamanuik: It was responsible for an entire generation of design talent that came into the studio because they had worked with and understood the Neverwinter Nights Aurora engine. Great PvP mods that came out of that, and great technical demos. Our first cinematic designer at BioWare, Brad Prince, completely hacked the Neverw nter Nights engine to be able to accomplish some of the first cinematic scenes that we did in our games, and it was because of that deep understanding of those tools and what you could accomplish, the power of the scripting language.

Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic

JOINING THE JEDI ORDER

While the studio wrapped up Neverwinter Nights, BioWare received the offer of a lifetime to work on the most popular science-fiction franchise in the world.

Zeschuk: Ray and I were trying to figure out what we were going to do next.

Muzyka: We had a list of IPs that we had been n contact with the owners of . they were big names.

Zeschuk: We had an X-Men RPG idea.

Muzyka: Yeah, Marvel was one of them, and there were a few other big ones. I think we were in contact with some of The Lord of the Rings folks.

Zeschuk: I remember the meeting that we had when we talked about Star Wars. When we had gotten the cal we were kind of pinch ng ourselves. We literally had a meeting the next day..

Muzyka: Yeah with our senior team, and we were gett ng their feedback on where we should go and...

Zeschuk: We wrote the names down on the board, right? All these names we had already talked about, and then we put "Star Wars RPG" at the top and they were just...

Muzyka: Everybody was like, "Are you effing kidding us?" and we were like, "Nope. Actually we just got the call."

Flynn: We were like, "My god, this is big time. A Star Wars game?" We had all grown up loving Star Wars, so it was nuts.

Muzyka: LucasArts asked if we wanted to do something set between the movies, but Simon Jeffery told us that would involve a lot more creative restrictions. Or we could go back to this series of comic books by Dark Horse called *Tales of the Jedi* It was like the Wild West of the Star Wars

2010

2011

period, thousands of years before the movies where there's Sith and Jedi running around having battles and the history of where the Sith came from and the Jedi Order, and the nuanced nature of it too. It's not black and white good and evil, it's actually just they both think they're right.

Hudson: When you work on Star Wars, or anyone else's big and important property, one challenge is to what degree are they going to push back and tell you what you can and can't do. Working on Knights of the Old Republic was amazing because for the most part we didn't feel constricted

Flynn: We had this vision with two key things. One was to create this choreographed combat system that made it look and feel like you were having lightsaber battles. The other was a cinematic storytelling camera.

Ohlen: We wanted to do full voiceovers for all the characters, and we wanted to do cinematic scenes. Make it feel more like a movie because we felt that Star Wars was a more cinematic experience than Dungeons & Dragons.

Flynn: It was really intense. The stakes were very high. LucasArts was a good partner, but they were certainly a bigger, less intimate partner than we had with Black Isle/Interplay

Watamaniuk: When Drew Karpyshyn and James Ohlen said, "Here's the twist," I understand the reaction from the team was actually pretty lackluster. Kind of, "That's your big twist, you're Revan?" I use that as an example today, as it's exceptionally hard to impart the magic of a moment in the game on paper.

Ohlen: When Drew and I watched *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club*, we analyzed them and broke them down, and we felt that we knew how to do a twist properly. But I was surprised by the success of [the Revan twist]; I couldn't see as it was coming out.

Jedi Empire

Muzyka: [The game] told you you were Revan at the exact moment your subconscious transferred to the conscious. So it felt like it was a magical moment. That was one of the high points of that game for me.

Hudson: As time goes by and people continue to refer back to it as being the twist that they really remembered, I don't think we ever expected it would have worked that well

Flynn: I think it's in the top ten storytelling moments in the industry.

NEW IP STYLE

Following the success of Knights of the Old Republic, BioWare made an aggressive turn toward creating its own intellectual property in hopes of landing a sustainable franchise. To go forward with the plan, the team dug into its trove of concepts dating back to its early years.

Muzyka: The kung fu setting had always been one that appealed to a lot of our team members. It was different than science fiction or fantasy and something kind of refreshing and different and unique. It seemed like there were a lot of great opportunities for exciting stories and characters. We looked at Legend of the Five Rings and...

Zeschuk: ... Many kung fu movies as well.

Muzyka: Even back in the days of Baldur's Gate we were talking about this as a potential setting.

Fargo: They wanted to do a kung fu role-playing game, and I just wouldn't do it. Like every six months, they'd say, "Come on!" They'd want to talk me into it. And I couldn't get excited about it.

Zeschuk: Early on, we built a really simple demo in Baldur's Gate, and then edited this silly trailer. The idea at that time was to take the BG engine, take this demo, and then take kung fu movies and re-dub them, because they were already dubbed to make the story. So we did this demo where we redubbed these kung fu movies. That kind of percolated for a long time.

Flynn: I think it was called Five Fingers of Death. I think they called it that in homage to the film, but it was just an internal title to give people a sense of what is was.

Fargo: I just thought of all the things we could be doing with BioWare, it wasn't the best use of their time to do an Asian, kung fu-style product. There was just so many things I could think of that I could do better and bigger with BioWare than that.

Flynn: There was this concept of classes that would morph into styles, but those styles would be flexible and changeable... And then when *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* came out in early 2000, it sealed the deal that we were doing the right thing.

Martens: Our goal was to capture that fantasy – can you feel like one of those heroes in that movie? Can it still feel like a BioWare game? We wanted to make an action game as well, so again we were biting off more than we could chew

Zeschuk: The crux of the challenge of the game was the real-time combat system. What was interesting about it is we didn't have a language on how to talk about it. We'd talk a lot about feel – "Hey, this doesn't feel right." When you think of other guys who make fighting games, they probably have this whole language or expertise, whereas for us, we hadn't had that expertise. We were these RPG experts.

Muzyka: It was actually a factor of what we wanted to do. We consciously wanted other types of genres and to see if we could take what's fun about those and merge it with what's fun about role-playing games

2012

2014

Flynn: One of the reasons it took five years is you realize just how little there is to push off of a blank canvas. How do you start, what do you do when you put things on the canvas? It takes different skills to create IP than it does to build great games based on others' IP.

Zeschuk: Jade was our transition point from old-school RPGs to new-school RPGs. That's where we tried out all this new stuff, learned a bunch, and then started applying it moving forward. People don't realize it was a real watershed game for us.

Darrah: Looking back at it the fighting mechanics in Jade Empire are pretty clumsy, but I think given there was literally no one who knew what they were doing, they were sort of successful.

Martens: That was the first thing that I did on my own without any direct oversight from James Ohlen, who was the godfather of BioWare design. I made a massive number of mistakes; I had no idea how to make an action game. My entire system was wrong. Knowing what I know now, there was no way I could have made a responsive game because I did not build the right kind of animation system to be able to do that... You could get through the whole game by flipping over every monster and punching them in the back. That's why it was so shallow. There were a million different fighting styles that captured every fantasy we could stuff in there, but none of them had any depth.

Muzyka: We had all these characters with hidden backstories that were actually fairly hard to get to in some cases, but were absolutely amazing if you unlocked them. You got this whole other area of quests and they were really good. You find out some crazy things that you wouldn't have imagined about some of the characters. I don't think a lot of our players actually discovered those.

Zeschuk: We sometimes use what we call the "retrospectoscope" and go, "What we could have done is delay it further, totally tweak the fighting engine up more because we were just starting to get the hang of it, and launch it with the 360 rather than the original Xbox." Launching as a 360 launch title would have been epic, but reality dictated it and that's where it ended up. But we still love the result.

Muzyka: I thought aesthetically it was one of the prettiest games we've ever built. The art style I still love looking at. And the story was compelling.

Zeschuk: Sometimes you can't always do your business dreams, but we'd have stuff get caught in pre-production sometimes just because the team couldn't quite hone in on what they were building. Jade 2 was a good example of that. Though we started almost doing a real-world Jade 2. Kind of revamp it and make it into a modern-world Jade 2.

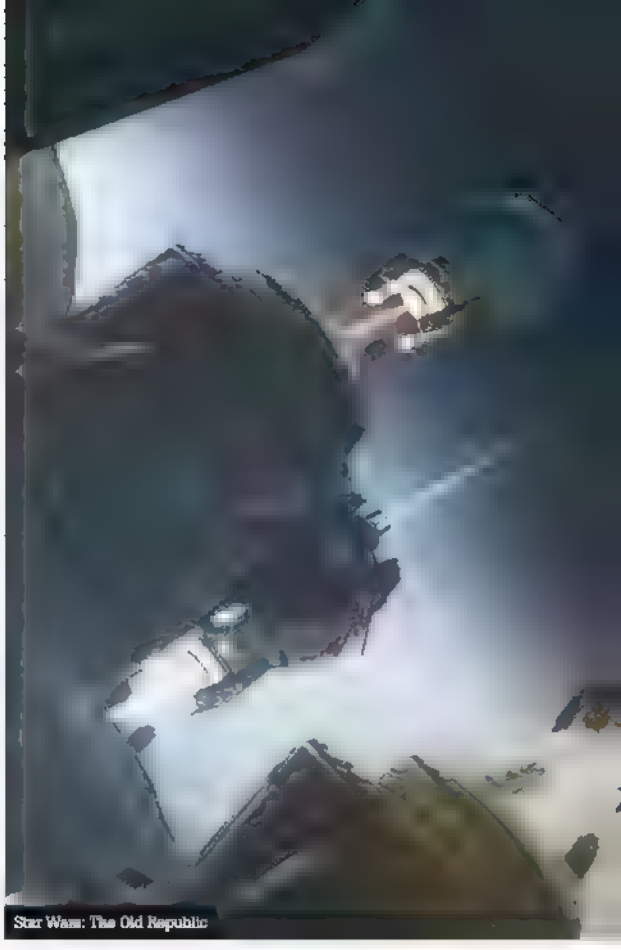
Martens: We didn't want to just make a straight sequel, because we knew that the game didn't do as well as we needed it to. So we tried to do something very different. We stumbled around in the weeds for a long time trying lots of different stuff, and as these things go, the final version of what we were making was of course the one that probably could have actually made it but we had spent too long. That would be my summary, and I'll put the blame on myself for that.

Zeschuk: There's this key point in our lifespan where we made the call to shut down projects and double down. So we had five projects going on at one time in addition to Mass Effect and Dragon Age, but we actually made the decision to double down on those because we felt the best thing we could do was just knock it out of the park with these two IPs.

Martens: I was heartbroken, but I also totally understood that it was the right call to shut it down and go back to something that we knew was going to do well.

Laidlaw: Jade as a sequel is never dead. If someone said, "We need something new," I'd be like, "Well, I have an idea."

Flynn: There are a lot of people who are still at the studio who worked on that game and want to get back to it. I think one of the advantages to getting back to it after a long time is not only nostalgia is a very powerful feeling in people, but skipping a generation of hardware is actually really exciting because it feels like it's not an evolution. It's a revolution of what you can do, and I think that's the kind of thing that brings people. What if we were to revolutionize Jade Empire and brought it back in that regard? That's the kind of talk that still happens around the studio.



Star Wars: The Old Republic

PLAYING BIOWARE

As production ramped down on Jade Empire in 2005, Zeschuk and Muzyka started taking the many third-party funding offers being made to them seriously, primarily because they needed capital to pursue the production of an MMORPG, to open new studios, and to invest in new IP. One deal in particular from private equity firm Elevation Partners would pair BioWare with fellow developer Pandemic Studios (Star Wars Battlefront, Mercenaries).

Zeschuk: We had offers to buy us frequently. Ray had this file in his office where he kept all of them.

Muzyka: Every year or two there would be another kick of the tires. They never led anywhere.

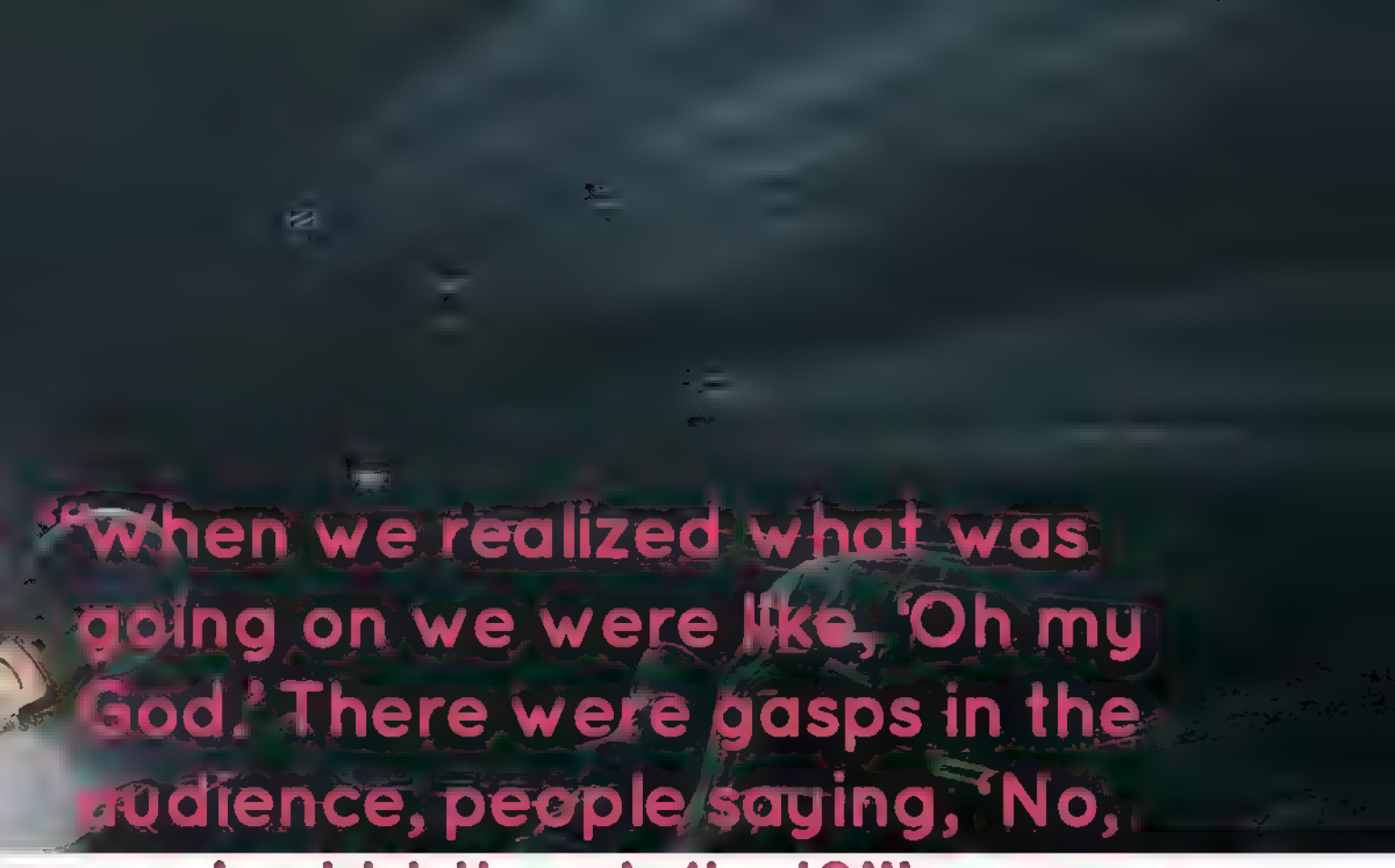
Zeschuk: So we had low expectations for these guys. We'd take these meetings every once in a while, especially if the person was in the finance industry. We knew Greg Richardson from Elevation Partners. He was a good dude, and so he comes and says, "We're interested."

Muzyka: We were considering building capital at the time, because we wanted to build an MMO. We wanted to take what we thought was a logical extension of what we were doing with RPG games.

Zeschuk: We wanted to be with a legit group, too. Once you're a partner it's like getting married. And we clicked really well. At the end of the day, they still left us in charge of our business.

Muzyka: It was one of the best periods at BioWare I can recall. It was a really fun period where we transformed the business from a development studio to that plus more.

Zeschuk: We got to dream big. They really let us imagine what we could be. And as Ray said, what was really neat was that with Pandemic, we knew those guys a bit, got to know them pretty well. We don't get a lot of chances to look inside other development studios and see how they're run.



"When we realized what was going on we were like, 'Oh my God.' There were gasps in the audience, people saying, 'No, you're kidding. What?'"

— Aaryn Flynn on the EA acquisition

Two years later, full purchase offers started coming in from publishers. In 2007 Elevation Partners founding partner John Riccitiello, now CEO at Electronic Arts, made a $860 million push to acquire the RPG hit-maker.

Muzyka: We got an offer from EA that we couldn't refuse, and it was good from every dimension. Not just financially, but creatively as well and in terms of the things we'd be allowed to do, providing liquidity to our employees.

Zeschuk: It's interesting because with Elevation they said you have the ability to refuse it.

Muzyka: It was actually an open discussion.

Zeschuk: Yeah, it wasn't like, "Yeah we got a good offer, you're sold. Here's the doc, sign it, see you later." It was actually an interesting conversation about the pros and cons.

Muzyka: It was a lot of money. But we didn't do it just for the money. Liquidity for our staff was a big part. The private equity guys were happy too, it was a nice multiplication of what they paid. But we also wanted to do what becoming a partner at EA would allow us to do. Become a publisher, have more flexibility and a global reach, and pursue new things and grow the business further. Offer more benefits to our staff, too. There were a lot of reasons to do it, and we thought seriously about it.

Flynn: When the announcement [of the acquisition] came down they called us down to a ballroom in the building/hotel we work in. Ray and Greg put a slide up and said we've sold the company again. When we realized what was going on we were like, "Oh my God." There were gasps in the audience, people saying, "No, you're kidding. What?"

Watamaniuk: We were reasonably independent, and then we were being bought out by one of the largest video game companies in the world, so of course there was trepidation. There was bit of a wait-and-see attitude about what would happen.

Flynn: There was a lot of concern and skepticism. We knew that there had been a pattern at EA of acquiring studios with much fanfare and money and such, and then lo and behold not long after the studios didn't survive. You were shut down or everyone had left and then shut down, whatever it was. There was a lot of nervousness and concern. I think it was only the huge amount of trust that we had in Ray and Greg that got us through that.

Darrah: EA did a very good job of telling us that they were going to largely leave us alone. When we were acquired, ..they had adopted a city-state model, which was essentially that they wanted studios to be relatively independent of each other.

Flynn: John Riccitiello flew up at the time of the acquisition and spoke very sincerely and honestly about why this was going to be different and why it made perfect sense to have BioWare and Pandemic join EA at the time. They were very conscious of their reputation, too, and they didn't shy away from hitting it head-on and saying, "We know that, that's on us, but what do we do? Never try to acquire anyone again, or do we try to do it again and do it right?"

Watamaniuk: We've built those relationships slowly but surely over time, and now we have great working relationships with Frostbite and working with them and coordinating on technology with them. It's an extremely rewarding relationship.

Zeschuk: You look back and see how much the games have actually made in the past, you know, six years or whatever it is – they made a lot of money. They probably made a return on their investment.

Muzyka: As soon as I became a SVP I got to see the original forecast, the projection, analysis they used to purchase us. I think we exceeded it in most respects.

GOING MASSIVE

With the cash influx from both Elevation Partners and then the EA acquisition, BioWare finally started pursuing its dream of releasing a grand-scale massively multiplayer online role-playing game in 2005. The long development required the opening of a new studio in Austin, Texas, and a lot of learning on the job.

Flynn: I used to play MMOs with Ray and Greg. I was playing Dark Age of Camelot, Asheron's Call, and Star Wars Galaxies. We would ask, "Are we ever going to make an MMO? This seems like a really cool thing we could do." They would say, "Well, we know Rob [Pardo] at Blizzard and it's a huge investment. It takes an entire studio to do that, and you have to dedicate yourself to do that." Then when World of Warcraft came out, everyone was like "Wow, okay, this is a game-changer. This is amazing."

Ohlen: BioWare is a business as well, and Ray and Greg have always been cognizant of that. One of the things that we felt was that online was going to be a big part of the future of gaming, and we really needed to be a part of that if we were going to be a successful business.

Zeschuk: I think for us it was a natural evolution of what we were building. We had toyed with it with Neverwinter Nights. We felt it would be fun to apply the BioWare principles to an MMO. To change the paradigm of what the experience was and put our stamp on it in a sense.

Ohlen: I was doing pitches with my lead writer, who was Daniel Erickson at the at the time. We were pitching all sorts of potential online RPGs. One based in the Dragon Age world, one based on the Game of Thrones world, what would a Stephen King *Dark Tower* MMO look like? We actually were thinking about doing *The Silmarillion* MMO, because at the time Elevation was our private equity partner, and Bono was one of the partners. Ray and Greg convinced Bono to phone Christopher Tolkien to see if he would be willing to allow us to work on *The Silmarillion* as a game, and Tolkien wouldn't even take Bono's call [laughs]. He's a grumpy guy.

Muzyka: We thought we'd make something that would reach a large audience, and Star Wars was one of the best IPs to do that.

Zeschuk: One of the benefits along the way of being part of EA is EA had bought Mythic, and Mythic was filled with people who had launched multiple MMOs. A lot of those people came and joined the team in the latter part and were able to help.

Ohlen: It was 2006 and Ray and Greg had called me into their office – I always get these surprises – they're like, "Hey James, you know how we've been discussing about starting up a new studio?" I was like, "Yes." They're like, "Well we're going to do it down in Austin. We have Richard Vogel and Gordon Walton that we're going to do it with, but we want someone to represent BioWare, so how about you go down to Austin?"

Zeschuk: Making regular games is hard. Making MMO games is even harder. And then the apples and orange comparison of existing MMOs is even harder. When you think about it, MMOs to some degree are habit forming. It's the habit of 10 p.m. or 8 p.m. you turn on your computer, you meet your friends online, and you do your stuff. People do this for years and it's just this habit they are in. So to try and interject your experience into that is very hard.

Ohlen: We had to ramp up from 10 to eventually 400 employees, so that was just one of the challenges. Just creating a pipeline of getting new talent into the studio. We also had to create a huge pipeline for all the story content we were going to do.

Zeschuk: You're always amazed how fast people play through the content, and our thought on the game was we wanted people to play multiple paths. We kind of knew the endgame was a little thin, but it's funny what the expectation for the end game actually is. I think what happened is Blizzard had trained people into this extreme endgame treadmill, which is to say that's what worked for them. We wanted to try and go a different way, but at the end of the day we kind of fell in line in a way.

Muzyka: We always tried to have a little bit more than what we thought would be required. Some of that is tempered by the reality that there's more mature MMOs out there that have more endgame developed. It doesn't really matter what they launched with, it's what they have now that people compare you against. I think we knew we had to build more content and quickly.

Ohlen: I'm very proud of what we accomplished with Star Wars: The Old Republic. Sure, when it launched it didn't become the success that we had wanted it to be. But it was the challenge of starting up a brand new studio, wrapping up all those people and delivering a game in a completely different genre, and we did it in five years when you look at it. I've been told "Five years is a long time, James." I'm like, "Come on, five years to do all that stuff is actually pretty good." We did spend a lot of money [laughs], and there was a lot of press on that obviously.

Zeschuk: Where did the $150 million number come from? I think it could be simple mathematics. There were a lot of people in the studio.

Muzyka: People probably took the rough guess of how many people were there and multiplied by time. I mean we never confirmed it. We never said what it was or wasn't. We've never talked about that. That's a proprietary piece of financial information for EA.

Zeschuk: World of Warcraft obviously continues to plug along, and now the Old Republic is still doing really, really well. I can't say any numbers, but it's like shockingly well, which is great. It's just the expectations were for a WoW-level success. We actually were probably up to two million playing at one point, so it was huge.

Star Wars: The Old Republic

BUILDING A SPACE TRILOGY

After releasing Knights of the Old Republic and Jade Empire, BioWare continued toward its goal of building sustaining gaming brands that it owned in whole. For its next major project, the studio aimed for the stars.

Zeschuk: I remember we started with me, Ray, and Casey sitting down at this Greek restaurant down the road from BioWare, and Casey says, "I want to make a big giant space opera."

Muzyka: We took some pens and paper out and started taking notes. We had a series of lunches as I recall at Yianni's.

Zeschuk: That was the Mass Effect place as a result.

Flynn: Casey and the team really did foresee it as a trilogy and wanted people to understand that the stories are too big and the progression is too important to keep to one game and just kind of see what happens after that.

Hudson: We wanted to combine the things that we loved about science fiction and the potential of this kind of story, which is like, you're still building a crew, you have a ship, and you have access to the whole galaxy and space exploration. But we really wanted to push on the space-exploration aspect, really let you go to uncharted worlds.

Watamanuik: Those meetings were extremely exciting. Building a new IP is simultaneously, in games, the most rewarding slash most terrifying thing you can do.

Flynn: Some of the ideas we had were "adulting" it up with romances and relationships. Taking it from PG to mature. And then giving ourselves [permission] to tackle the themes that come along with that.

It would be about building characters and animation systems so that these characters could really act, and that you could interact with them in ways that are very much about the emotion of the moment. And then, building that into not a "good" and "evil" system, but more of a sense of really challenging moral decisions. That was kind of the idea.

Zeschuk: We almost always build too much content to start, and then you cut out a few planets and you have to patch it together. Our eyes are always bigger than our stomachs. And that's one benefit of the trilogy, you go, "Let's just move this one over there, and move that whole arc on this planet or world into the next one and then we'll tighten this one up a bit."

Watamanuik: We knew the story of Shepard would be three games, we knew it would evolve around the escalation of the conflict with the Reapers, and we knew that the ultimate endgame for that would be the showdown that you see in Mass Effect 3.

Muzyka: We thought announcing it as a trilogy it would get some attention. I guess that's why we did that. And also it was to plant this stake in the ground to say this was going on in the long term and if you invest in it, fans, then we're going to be in it for the long haul.

Zeschuk: We had a really hilarious set of conversations about what Mass Effect was with Microsoft because they were just not getting it. I shouldn't say they weren't getting it. I should say they were concerned it was too much like Halo. So they kept trying to push it to these ridiculous non-confrontational story game things. They thought it was too close to Halo.

Muzyka: I don't remember that.

Zeschuk: Don't you remember Shepard as the diplomat of the universe?

Muzyka: Maybe I just ignored it because I didn't think it was going anywhere.

Zeschuk: Well, no, we killed it. And that's the challenge, actually, that you always have when you have your own thing. You can say, "Nope, Shepard's a badass."

Hudson: You have to push back on it in terms of what you believe in.

Zeschuk: There were a couple things along the way in Mass Effect we did, things like completely changing the combat system two months before we shipped and did a bunch of aggressive changes.

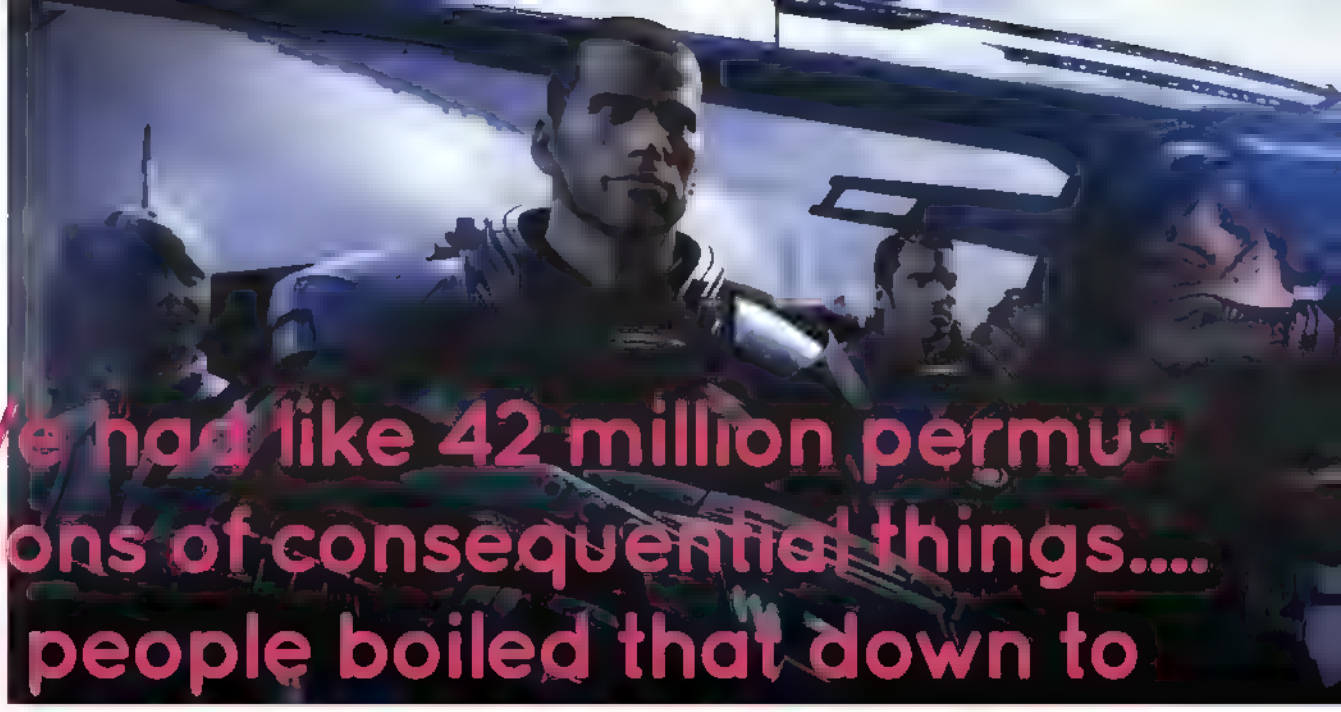
Muzyka: Interface changes as well because it wasn't working two or three months before launch. I think it scared the s--- out of our publishing partners at Microsoft.

Zeschuk: We would do that all the time. We would say we don't like this, we're changing it and they were like. . .

Muzyka: You know, we can actually thank them at the same time because their usability labs were awesome. We needed that feedback of players playing the game in the real world who weren't familiar with it who were just like, "This isn't fun," or, "I just don't get what I have to do next."

Hudson: What I love both about KOTOR and what we do with Mass Effect is the stories that people relate to us about having played them. They're such deeply emotional stories that people will talk about how they played it throughout their cancer treatment. Something for them to really focus on and be a hero who was pushing through adversity, that they could live through this character in an alternate universe and get to that kind of escapism.

Zeschuk: You could see it was resonating with the fans on the sci-fi side. It became a property that people really were attached to, which was wonderful.



"...We had like 42 million permutations of consequential things.... But people boiled that down to the last 30 seconds."

Preston Watamaniuk on Mass Effect 3

Mass Effect proved a successful gamble for BioWare, earning widespread praise and entrenching the brand enough to solidify its prospects for the trilogy. For the second game, the studio focused on shoring up technical deficiencies.

Flynn: Ray and Greg had built into the studio a culture of critical feedback, not being afraid to evolve and change things. You see it very clearly over the course of Mass Effect 1, 2, and 3. They evolved tremendously. Definitely between ME 1 and 2. Even as it was a trilogy we were committed that we wouldn't just end up with the same mechanics. If there was a better way to do something we would be fine with doing it that way.

Muzyka: The team knew what areas it wanted to target based on internal review, fan feedback, and critical feedback, as well as a lot more confidence about technology because we knew we would go back and do a reintegration of the final Unreal engine and that would be a good platform to build on. That led to a lot better framerate, and it was smoother and some of the little glitches that the first game had we were able to resolve.

Watamaniuk: Between ME 1 and 2, I had a really great in-depth analysis done on the combat system by someone who was more of an action designer and a gameplay person. They gave a lot of really great insight into where we should be moving in order to turn the game into a better cover-based shooter.

Flynn: That era was the rise of the console shooter. Call of Duty 4 had just come out, and so we realized there was this amazingly clear set of mechanics. Gears of War did a great job with its third-person cover-shooter mechanic, so we just wanted to say that maybe the role-playing was better served in other places rather than the shooting mechanic itself and we'd stick with a more established shooting mechanic. That was the change in ME 2.

Watamaniuk: That entire game was about the characters that you meet, how you felt they were kind of like real individuals, and then the fact that you had to risk them at the end to actually accomplish your mission, right? I think at the core that's a pretty interesting premise.

Zeschuk: It became a property that people really were attached to, which was wonderful. We wanted to create a game that was appealing to everyone, not just a narrow group.

Mass Effect 2 earned universal praise, landing BioWare its highest Metacritic rating to date. Moving into the final chapter of the Mass Effect trilogy, the studio had a lot to live up to.

Flynn: Obviously the ambition of the team that made Mass Effect 3 was to fulfill the promise of the overall trilogy, especially after a 96 Metacritic and all that kind of stuff. They felt like ME3 would be a lot of hard work, but they knew what they had to do.

Muzyka: In terms of production values, quality of gameplay, the interactions, the animations, and the art, across the board I thought it was one of the best games in the franchise.

Flynn: I think we were very oblivious to criticisms of the ending as we were developing it. I remember about a week or so after we had launched it, we'd seen all these excellent critical reviews. EA was super proud of us and it was great, then all of the sudden people were saying, "I felt the ending was weak." And someone would say, "Yeah, I thought it was actually pretty bad." And someone else would say, "I hated that ending." It just snowballed like crazy, and pretty soon the whole issue was on fire.

Watamaniuk: I did an analysis of the ending just to say, "Well how many permutations do we have of the ending?" and before we released the extended cut we had like 42 million permutations of consequential things like this ship is there versus not there, this guy is dead, you have a conversation with this guy versus this guy. But people boiled that down to the last 30 seconds, right? And they, for better or for worse, focused on that as the entire trilogy.

Zeschuk: Because the whole game is based on making choices and controlling the character, and controlling the story, I think the moment the players feel like they have lost that they feel like the whole agency is lost, the whole premise is shot. It's actually a fundamental thing, a lot more than the dialogue wasn't right. "Hey, I don't feel like it's consistent with what I thought." If anything, it comes back to everyone at the end of the day wants to pick their ending.

Flynn: We didn't have a playbook for this. We were getting used to social media, we were coming to grips with almost a decade of development coming to a close ourselves, and lo and behold we have this incredible hot-button issue for the industry that was there.

Zeschuk: I think one of the other interesting things on that topic is there was an interesting level of solidarity from other industry people. You may recall, Ken Levine came out quite strongly supporting us. I remember that quite distinctly, and he gets it. He's walked that walk.

BioWare stopped making Dungeons and Dragons games after Neverwinter Nights, but several of its developers still had a soft spot for fantasy role-playing games. For years, the team incubated ideas on how to make a spiritual successor to Baldur's Gate.

Ohlen: We had given up on Baldur's Gate and I felt that that was a mistake. I know it was a license, but I was like, "Alright, if we're going to not do Baldur's Gate then we have to do a spiritual successor because it's a big part of who we are." It was essentially, "How do we make our own Baldur's Gate?" That was the genesis of it. I think from when we started working on the IP it was me and David Gaider who were working on the IP I think that we were probably being really close to the standard norms of fantasy.

Darrah: Dragon Age Origins went through a lot of turns, because there was essentially a group working on it pretty much from the point that Neverwinter shipped. It was multiplayer at one point, then it wasn't, then it was again, then it wasn't. It was originally going to be PC only, and then the consoles got added.

Flynn: Ray and Greg had always had the perspective that you only get one chance to launch a new IP, so if we're going to launch our own new fantasy universe, it has to be big and huge. I mean this was a time when The Lord of the Rings movies had already been out, and the bar had been set for what's visually amazing.

Muzyka: It took a long time to get finished because the engine was being developed and the ambition to make it a lot of different things was maybe too broad.

Darrah: So the writers were really just pulling and pushing for getting the story together. There were a couple of factions within the design department. At the time Oblivion was recent, which had a very physics-driven world interaction, so one group was really pulling in that direction, even though we didn't actually have a physics engine at the time. There were also some groups that were really just trying to double down on the toolsets and make it much more like Neverwinter.

Darrah: Everyone was kind of pulling in their own directions. They were mostly pulling in the same direction, but there was just a lot of disagreement. It had become much more about people implementing their own individual things.

Muzyka: When it focused down it became a really great game. It's one of my favorites.

Darrah: I do think it did a very good job of establishing an IP. We probably oversold Grey Warden a little bit too much in the marketing material, but we did a very good job of establishing Dragon Age as this member of the pantheon of fantasy IPs.

Laidlaw: Seeing the initial responses come in, seeing people kind of look through it and say, "Well there's some real benefits here, there's some really cool world-building," positive response to the origin stories and so on, was quite heartening.

For the second entry in the series, BioWare took on an aggressive development schedule unprecedented in its history.

Darrah: Dragon Age II was done in pretty much 14 months start to finish. We were working on what became Inquisition when we were asked to turn it around much more quickly, in part because of Star Wars: The Old Republic was kind of stumbling along. We wanted to tell a more personal story, and this seemed like a good opportunity to do it. So that's why Dragon Age II is smaller and more focused on one character and the story of his family, as opposed to the story of saving the world. It's a story I really like, but I think the story was also a big departure for BioWare.

Muzyka: Some of that support turned against us when we said we're actually going to patch some changes. There was a lot of initial support saying this feedback is not reasonable, they shouldn't have to change it. But when we actually said we are, then all of the sudden a lot of those creators flipped and said, "What the hell are they doing that for?"

Zeschuk: Exactly. It was a bit of a lightning rod.

Muzyka: We weren't listening to that either, we were just kind of observing it and we respect all of those people. They have a right to their opinion just like the fans do, but we made our own decision based on what we thought was the right thing to do for the fans.

Flynn: I remember [former EA president] Frank Gibeau said to Casey and I, "Are you guys sure you want to do this? We'll support you either way."

Watamaniuk: What we did is we clarified, and what we had said from the beginning is that we are not changing the endings. We are not adding a new ending, which we didn't. But what we did do is add more clarity, because some of the feedback was, "I wish there had been more information about what happened." And so we added that.

Dragon Age: Origins

Laidlaw: It was on a bit of a compressed timeline, so there were going to be some significant challenges to it. For me, a lot of the goals behind that were to try and figure out how we could develop the game that met that timeline goal, ideally while continuing to expand on the world and produce some more interesting content.

Darrah: I think the biggest sin we committed was reusing environments and pretending like they were different environments. You see a lot of games that actually have less, a lot less square footage than Dragon Age II does, but get away with it in large part because there's no lie. But when we close the door and call this warehouse a different warehouse, or call this manor house a different manor house because there is some crates in front of the door, I think that criticism is very valid.

Laidlaw: The overwhelming commentary was that it was not a satisfying sequel to Dragon Age Origins, right? It failed to have the variety, it failed to deliver on as strong essential plot and premise. The combat had changed enough that it was perceived, and you know I wouldn't argue with this, as charitably overfocused on action, uncharitably dumbed down. The experience as a result felt unsatisfying and like it wasn't a Dragon Age II.

Muzyka: I think that's some of the trouble we ran into for Dragon Age II. People had the expectation of something more nonlinear with exploration and a nonlinear story. Then we created barriers for them because the content, the art was a little more channeled. That and the less flexibility on costuming and character creation, all that.

Laidlaw: When I think back on it, if I had my druthers, you know, when we were building it, we were not entirely sure that it should be called Dragon Age II, so much as, at the time it had a working title of Dragon Age Exodus.

Zeschuk: We tried to streamline, and we went too far.

Muzyka: Exactly. We went too far.

Laidlaw: It went too fast, too actiony, certainly I've seen that feedback from fans extensively. Let no one think that they need to send me another tweet about Dragon Age II – I've read all the stuff there is to read, and even at great personal sanity expense.

Laidlaw: I came to BioWare because I wanted to craft good experiences. You're not going to have a 100-percent success rate, but it doesn't feel good when you feel like you've let people down.

LEVELING UP AND AWAY

Following the release of Mass Effect 3 in March, the Doctors made an announcement that shocked the video game industry just six months later – they were retiring and walking away from the RPG hit-making machine they built from the ground up.

Muzyka: [The development of Mass Effect 3] was bit melancholic for Greg and me because I think we were starting to mull over how much longer do we want to do this? Not even consciously at that point yet. It became conscious later in the year or early next year.

Zeschuk: People always ask was [the Mass Effect 3 controversy] the thing that pushed you over the edge? No, that wasn't a part of the decision at all. We spent 20 years super-focused on something. When you have done what you set out to accomplish, I think that it's time to move on.

Ohlen: They had been hinting at it for quite a long time.

Darrah: I kind of always figured they would kind of go together. Just because of the way their relationship had worked for so long. I think they probably felt they always had to do it together, end it off in one big swipe.

Urquhart: I think being at EA is different from running an independent studio. They had a lot to think about, and that led them to decide to try some new things.

Muzyka: I think we were tired just generally. Not tired of that situation, just tired and ready to try something different. That's why I'm now doing angel impact investing in social enterprise, information technology, and medical innovations now at ThresholdImpact. It's fun to try new things and apply what I've done before as a doctor and in BioWare to these new areas. I wanted to try something fresh.

Zeschuk: I'm just trying to make the BioWare of beer.

Ohlen: It was a tough time for the BioWare studio and a lot of people inside BioWare. For me, growing up with those guys, I look at them as having made me as not only the game designer I am, but the man I am overall.

Watamaniuk: It was a sad day. You're not going to lie about that, right? Those are the guys that most of the people in the room got their jobs directly from, Ray or Greg. And then those guys are leaving. That was the end of an era.

Muzyka: I really felt our team was really ready to step up and take the reins of the company. When you feel that it's nice just to give them the space to do it so you're not just still there and say we're retiring and it's in your hands now. You're our chosen successors, and we're here to transition for six months, and support you and help you, and good luck!

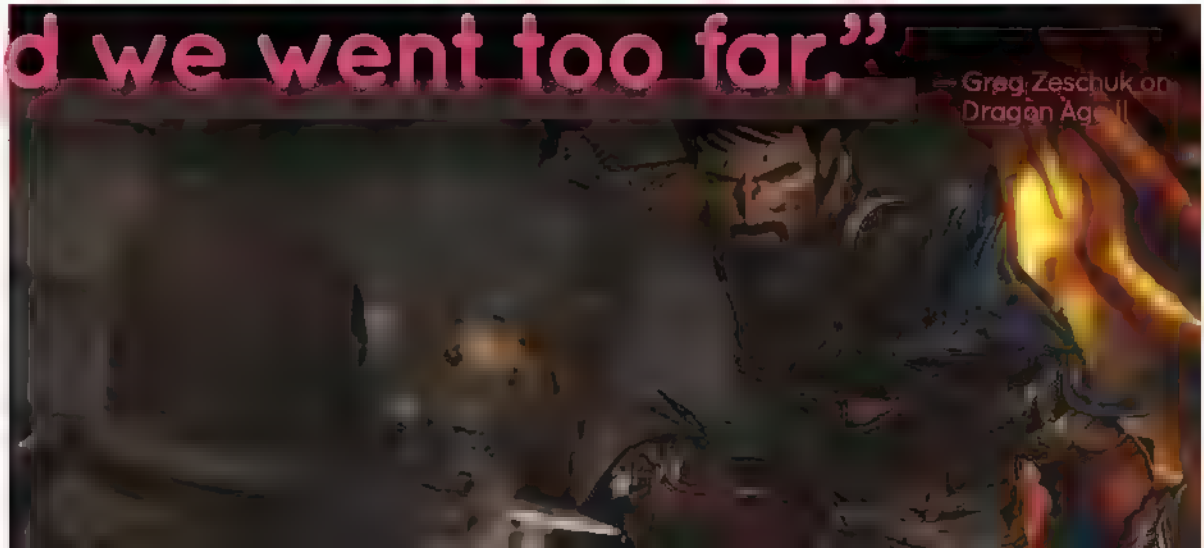
Ohlen: Before they left they made sure BioWare would be set up for success afterwards. Aaryn Flynn, who's the GM of BioWare studios now, I see a lot of the best qualities of Ray and Greg in Aaryn. He's kind of like Ray and Greg 2.0 [laughs].

Watamaniuk: He was in the trenches for a long time. It's not like we just sort of plucked a manager out of thin air from nowhere. Aaryn knows what it's like to build a game.

Laidlaw: [The doctors] still come to the Christmas parties. So, they're neither gone, nor forgotten.

"We tried to streamline, and we went too far."

— Greg Zeschuk on Dragon Age II



Dragon Age: Inquisition

THE "PROVE IT" GAME

As the first major game being created in the absence of the studio founders, Dragon Age: Inquisition had a lot more riding on it than merely recalibrating the Dragon Age series. The game also served as an opportunity for BioWare to prove it was still the high-caliber RPG studio without the doctors leading the way.

Darrah: A lot of the early days for Dragon Age: Inquisition were soul-searching in terms of the lessons of Dragon Age II and trying to respond to those criticisms...Dragon Age II definitely had lasting psychic scars on the Dragon Age team.

Laidlaw: We wanted to make sure that Inquisition was an excellent experience, and we knew we were going to be going uphill, right? An engine change is an immensely challenging, difficult time for any project. Moving to Frostbite was not going to be simple, and we knew we were going to have to deploy the game to five platforms.

Darrah: Because Ray and Greg were gone, but also because we were coming off of Dragon Age II, it was very important to show that this was still a strong franchise. Dragon Age: Inquisition absolutely had a lot riding on it in terms of being good.

Flynn: We felt an enormous amount of pressure. We knew with Ray and Greg having retired it was our chance to show that Ray and Greg had taught us well and we weren't going to follow the apocryphal stories of EA crushing every other studio it buys under its thumb. We were determined to not let that happen.

Darrah: You look at the start with Baldur's Gate I and then kind of follow the trajectory, our games were getting smaller and smaller and tighter and tighter. I'm glad we got back to exploration with Inquisition; even though it's not a perfectly implemented feature there are a lot of lessons to be learned from games that have come since Inquisition. I think it's just good that we've reasserted that our games include an aspect of world exploration, as opposed to we're just making a budget version of Uncharted.

Laidlaw: We had to wander through the desert for a while to build up some of that expertise in the studio. But at no point did we ever really want to just make a Skyrim, where it's all open world on its own. There was a heavy focus on having rich story elements, so that people didn't feel like again it was letting down that legacy of Origins.

Muzyka: Dragon Age: Inquisition was the first BioWare game I played that I hadn't played before it was launched. I think it's the best thing they've ever done.

Flynn: It was actually our most successful launch of a game at BioWare.

TO THE FUTURE

Dragon Age: Inquisition reviewed strongly and won several game-of-the-year awards from press outlets, including Game Informer. Now BioWare looks to the future with Mass Effect Andromeda, the next entry in the Dragon Age series, the continuation of Star Wars: The Old Republic, and a new game franchise being developed at the Edmonton headquarters.

Muzyka: One of the most exciting things for me is knowing that the team is going to do even bigger and better things and we can sit back as fans and just enjoy it now. That makes me very happy. I feel very lucky that we got to work with all the people we worked with over the last 20 years at BioWare.

Zeschuk: We get that weird question like, "Aren't you jealous or mad?" It's like, "No."

Muzyka: No. I'm ecstatic. You're like a parent. Your kid goes off to school. That's how I feel about the company. I don't have kids, my wife and I have cats. BioWare is sort of my kid, almost.

Watamaniuk: I actually honest-to-god believe what people take away from our games is not the story, it is those characters they really loved and resonated with. At the trilogy, Garrus was not designed to be your best friend, was not designed to be that ultimate pal. We added that value because fans just cared; something about Garrus just resonated with people. I think it's going to be the characters. I think it's going to be the Wrexes, the Tails, those are going to be the kind of things that people remember. They might not remember even specifically the plot of any of the games, but they're going to remember the characters that became their virtual friends.

Darrah: I feel like within the next year or so that the company will be able to accelerate ourselves. Not that we're going to be shipping games everyday, but we should be able to deliver a better, more polished experience because we will able to focus more on that aspect of game development and less around just building the building blocks we're going to use to put the games together.

Flynn: What I hope we accomplish at BioWare is to continue to be excited in doing things with new technologies, and telling better and better stories thanks to those technologies.

The Wizard Of Blizzard

Not many game developers can tout a resume that matches or surpasses that of Blizzard president Mike Morhaime. Since co-founding the company in 1991 under the name Silicon & Synapse, Morhaime has helped orchestrate the creation of genre-defining blockbuster after blockbuster, from StarCraft and World of Warcraft to Hearthstone and Overwatch. We chatted with the hall-of-fame developer about the studio's past and present.

Blizzard has been in the industry for 25 years now. What has stayed the same and what is completely different?
What stayed the same is we have folks here so passionate about making games and gaming in general. I think that is really important because in order to create the best games you have to immerse yourself in that experience. We still use a very iterative game development process – there's a lot of trial and error. You have to get folks who weren't involved in that design process and see how they experience these things in order to polish and iterate that experience, and so we can continue using a very similar process even though the scale of our games is much larger than they were in the early days. One of our values is still "gameplay first," which really means "game experience first." We want to make them easy to learn, difficult to master.

What's different? Back when we started, the games industry was primarily a North American market. The rest of the world was sort of an afterthought. We would release our games in English and over the course of maybe 12 to 24 months, get around to localizing it in other languages. Nowadays, gaming has really become a mass market part of consumer culture, and it's global.

Blizzard co-founder Allen Adham is back with the company now after a long hiatus. How did that come about?
Allen originally was president of the company and I was vice-president. That basically remained the case until 1998, shortly after we released

StarCraft. Allen stepped down, moved into a chairman role, and I took over the presidential duties. He began focusing more on game design and less on management of the company after that point and was involved in the design for World of Warcraft. Allen was lead designer on that project for a good chunk of time.

Probably the year before World of Warcraft shipped, I guess that was 2003 or 2004, Allen left the company, got married, and started a hedge fund, which he managed for about 12 years. Then just this past year, Allen gave me a call and said, "You know what? It's been a long time but I'd really like to get back into game-making," at which point I said, "Absolutely, we're so excited to have you back." We had him talk to everybody at Blizzard. Of course Blizzard had grown a ton since he had been gone, but Allen's back at the company so we now have all three founders working at Blizzard again for the first time in 12 years.

What's the thinking behind changing the name of Battle.net after such a long period of using the phrase?
It's something we really debated a lot internally. What it comes down to is, "What's Battle.net?" It's Blizzard's gaming service. It started to be this brand that was almost competing with our other main brands. So what are the most important things we want to convey? The name of the game you're playing and it being published and developed by Blizzard Entertainment. In order to play a Blizzard game you have to create a Battle.net account. Why do you have to create a Battle.net account? Shouldn't you just create a Blizzard account to log into Blizzard games?

I think that for those of us who have been playing Blizzard games for a really long time, it's a really easy thing to understand, but imagine if you're a new player and you want to play Overwatch. You need to have a Battle.net account to do that, and you don't necessarily associate Battle.net with Blizzard. It's overly confusing, so we want to streamline and simplify it down. If you want to play Overwatch, then you need to charge your Blizzard balance. You need a Blizzard account to do that just like you need with all the Blizzard games.

Has there ever been any discussion about adding other Activision brands to the Blizzard launcher, like Call of Duty or Destiny?
There was a period of time where we talked about adding non-Blizzard games in general from any third-party developer. But we found we really had our hands full with this service just adding features and capabilities to support all the Blizzard games, and we felt that really needed to be our priority. It was even confusing keeping as a sort of long-term goal to expand this service out to be able to support that stuff at one point. We ultimately internally decided this is going be a Blizzard platform and we're going to focus on supporting Blizzard games. There may be a way to leverage that technology with other companies within the Activision-Blizzard family, but I think from a branding and consumer-facing perspective, we want to keep the service focused on just the Blizzard games.

What are the chances that we're going to see a Warcraft 4? Or are RTS games out of the spotlight for Blizzard at this point?
We love RTS games, but right now our focus is still continuing to evolve StarCraft II and – to the extent that MOBA games are RTS – continue supporting and evolving Heroes of the Storm. I love that there is so much passion and interest around Warcraft 4. I would love to see Warcraft 4 at some point in the future, but that is not our current focus.

Blizzard has found success in the RTS, MMO, FPS, and digital card game genres. What other genres do you see as possibilities?
I think we are always looking at everything. We play a ton of games here, and we're always brainstorming new ideas. I don't think we have anything to announce at this moment, but I think that still people haven't really figured out what the killer app for mobile is. I think there's a huge opportunity there. We certainly have so many people with these powerful gaming devices in their pockets that they are walking around with every day. I feel like there's a lot of unexplored ground still.

Tell me about your band, the Elite Tauren Chieftains. How did that get started?
We had a band. We were just playing cover songs for fun, and then some of the guys started writing some original material and then we had a tradition with our RTS games where whenever we released an expansion, there would be kind of a joke song that was created by our audio department. Tracy Bush at the time had this idea: "Hey why don't we get your band to go and record this song." He took a stab at writing something, and the band decided instead to take one of the band's songs, change the words, and make it Warcraft themed. That became Power of the Horde. When we were doing our first Blizzcon, somebody had the idea, "Hey, why don't we have you guys play at Blizzcon?" We had never played live anywhere before so we're like, "Are you guys crazy? We're not a real band." And they were like, "No no no, you can do it!"

And we got the Offspring ..they played Blizzcon. This sort of started to be real. "Hey why don't you guys open for Offspring at Blizzcon, the closing ceremony." You can't really turn that down. So we just started practicing like crazy and wrote two more songs because you can't just go out there and play one song. Because originally "The Power of the Horde" was on the Warcraft III expansion disc. The max level that a Tauren Chieften could be was tenth level so we were Tenth Level Tauren Chieften. And then with World of Warcraft, we couldn't be tenth level anymore so we changed the name to Level 60 Elite Tauren Chieftain for the Warcraft theme. We kind of created a tradition of every time we play, we never play twice with the same name. We're always max level.

What is Blizzard's temperature on VR? Is Blizzard planning to do anything in that environment?
We're very excited about it here. We think there's going to be all sorts of cool things we'll be able to do with VR. But I think that the big opportunity for gaming and reaching the large audience with VR is still probably a long way away.

Where is the future of Blizzard going? What's next on the horizon?
We have a huge responsibility to players playing our current games to continue evolving and supporting those games. I think the worlds we've created are compelling and interesting, so I'd love to see us do more to explore storytelling within those worlds. I'm really proud of the shorts we've created for Overwatch, and I'd like to see us do more of that. Hopefully the Warcraft film won't be our last feature. I'd like to see us do more of that as well, and I think we learned a ton from that experience. And Overwatch isn't our last new game.

One more thing – eSports has been a big focus of Blizzard's for a long time. I think it's a great way of bringing the community together around these games. For a long time, we knew it would eventually grow into something much bigger. It feels like we're starting to approach that tipping point now where eSports is breaking out of the niche that it sat in for such a long time and into something the world is starting to pay attention to. So that's exciting to see.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1990
Mike Morhaime earns his bachelor's degree from UCLA

1991
Along with fellow UCLA graduates Allen Adham and Frank Pierce, Morhaime forms the game design studio Silicon & Synapse, porting games to new platforms for publishers

1993
Silicon & Synapse's first original game, a puzzle platformer called The Lost Vikings, releases on SNES and Genesis

1994
Davidson & Associates acquires Silicon & Synapse, and the studio changes its name to Blizzard Entertainment. Shortly thereafter the studio ships its first blockbuster hit, Warcraft: Orcs and Humans

1998
Blizzard strikes gold again with another real-time strategy PC game, StarCraft

2004
World of Warcraft releases, setting the new high bar for MMORPGs, a standard that still hasn't been bested more than a decade later

2008
Morhaime receives a Technology & Engineering Emmy Award for World of Warcraft and becomes the eleventh inductee into the AIAS hall of fame

2015
Heroes of the Storm firmly entrenches Blizzard in the growing MOBA scene

2016
Overwatch launches to near-universal praise, garnering a rare 10/10 from Game Informer

Holiday BUYING GUIDE

2016

even know you wanted. Whether you're looking for a hot new item to add to your wish list or need that perfect geeky gift to give to a loved one, here's a roundup of the best toys and tech money can buy this year. Who needs Santa? You have us.

UNDER $25

01

Chicozy Cotton Avengers Alliance
Dress your couch in the finest nerdery without breaking the bank. These stylish throw pillows are made out of a durable cotton linen and measure 18 inches square
$9.99 | fandomshop.net/shop

02

Fallout Antique Gold & Silver Vault 111 Pocket Watch
Punctuality will still be in style even after the apocalypse. Keep perfect time during V.A.T.S. firefights with this 1.7-inch, antique-styled quartz pocket watch
$15.00 | etsy.com/shop/babydollcraftz

03

Society6 Dinosaur Art
These gallery-quality Giclées come on ultra-smooth, 100-percent cotton paper, but you could print this art on old McDonald's wrappers and they'd still look awesome.
$18.00 | society6.com

04

Dishonored 2 Emily & Corvo Pop! Vinyl Figures
Empress Emily Kaldwin and her father Corvo are deadly supernatural assassins, but they display their adorable side in these Funko vinyl figures.
$19.99 | funko.com

SPOTLIGHT

Mass Effect N7 Armour Stripe Scarf
Stay warm and fashionable while [illegible] Effect-inspired scarf made from 100-percent viscose. The scarf measures 30 inches wide by 72 inches long. Even Commander Shepard didn't have this [illegible]
$25.00 | [illegible]

$25–$50

01

Star Wars: The Force Awakens Beginner Game
Create your own epic adventures in the new Star Wars timeline with Fantasy Flight's celebrated RPG. Clear rules and pre-made characters make getting started easy, and Star Wars fans will geek out over the galactic map
$29.95 | fantasyflightgames.com

02

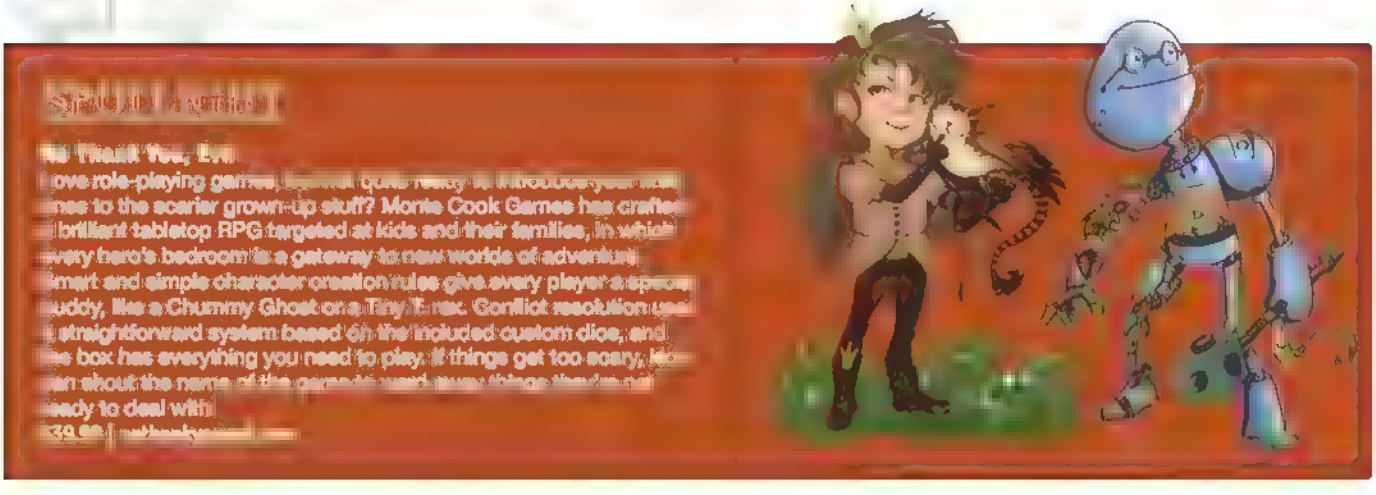
8bitdo Cube Speaker
Modern design meets a classic aesthetic in this NES-inspired wireless Bluetooth speaker complete with a giant d-pad controls and an eight-hour battery.
$29.99 | 8bitdo.com

03

Bloodborne Card Game
Fans of FromSoftware's devilishly challenging Victorian horror adventure should check out the evocative card game by superstar game designer Eric M. Lang. Expect to die – a lot – as you compete to become the greatest monster hunter
$34.99 | cmon.com

04

The Hori Fighting Stick Mini 4
Hori's new fight stick trims that fat without sacrificing functionality The Mini 4 is almost half-sized, but it remains comfortable and incredibly responsive
$39.99 | stores.horiusa.com



05

R2-D2 French Press

R2-D2 helped fuel our love of Star Wars, now he can fuel your mornings. This officially licensed Star Wars bean machine holds up to 32 ounces of coffee and a splash of sass.

$39.99 | thinkgeek.com

06

Geeky Christmas Jumpers

Yellow Bulldog's geek-themed Christmas sweaters are the best way to stay warm and jolly. Themes include Assassin's Creed, Star Wars, and Spider-Man.

$43.50 | yellowbulldog.co.uk

07

Nendoroid Kirby's Dream Land: Kirby Figure

It's easy to get sucked in by Kirby's adorable, pink form. This 2.4-inch figure from Good Smile Company uses built-in magnets to let you pose Kirby and change his costumes.

$44.99 | goodsmile.info/en

08

Virtua Fighter Figma Figure

Based on the revolutionary 1993 arcade classic, the articulation on these imported six-inch figures from FREEing might actually be more fluid than their original digital counterparts.

$44.99 | goodsmile.info/en

$50–$100

I'm definitely borrowing this

01

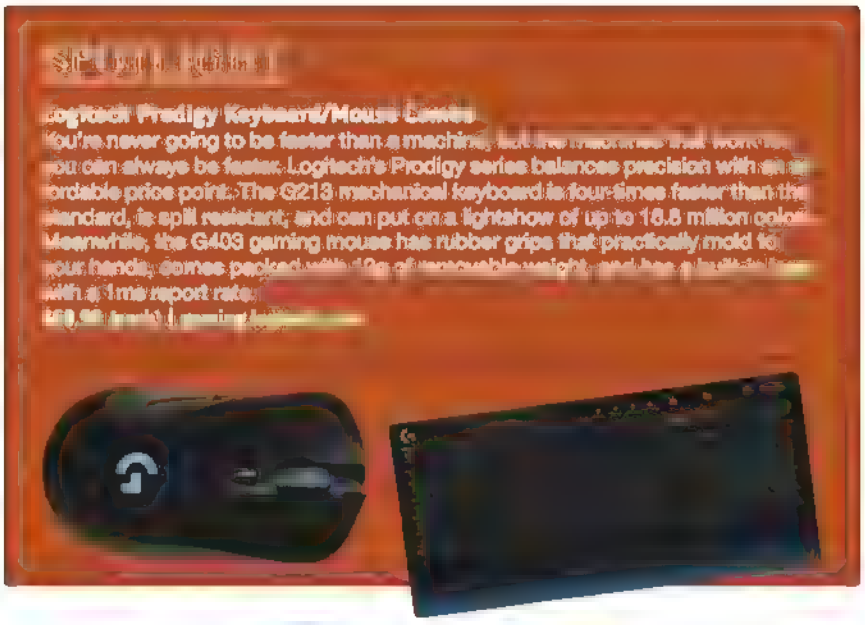
NES Classic Edition
Nintendo packed 30 NES classics – such as Mega Man 2, Punch-Out!!, and all three original Super Mario Bros. titles – into one adorable package that connects to modern TVs with an HDMI cable
$59.99 | nintendo.com/nes-classic

02

Musterbrand Zelda Collection
This collection of Zelda-inspired gear includes scarves, coats, and bags. But our favorite is this hooded cotton jersey, which is perfect for both Ren Fest and the recliner
$59.99 (shirt) | us.musterbrand.com

03

Uncharted Avery's Coin Necklace
The real treasure at the end of Uncharted 4 was family bonding, but we still want the gold. Each one of these antiqued brass coins is hand-aged for the authentic pirate look.
$60.00 | gear.playstation.com



04

Vans X Nintendo Shoes

Vans wraps your feet in a series of impressive graphic prints featuring legendary Nintendo characters like Mario, Zelda, and Donkey Kong. Also, Luigi

$65.00+ | vans.com/shop

05

SeaFall

Every game session is different in this board game from the designer of Pandemic Legacy. Sail the high seas, win glory and fame, and watch as the game evolves based on your last playthrough

$79.95 | plaidhatgames.com

06

Xbox Design Lab Wireless Controller

The best controller on the market just got better thanks to a built-in headphone jack, textured handgrips, and 8 million customizable color combinations.

$79.99 | xboxdesignlab.xbox.com

07

Lego Star Wars Krennic's Imperial Shuttle

This intimidating Imperial shuttle from *Rogue One* features folding wings, dual spring-loaded shooters, and retractable landing skids.

$89.99 | shop.lego.com

08

Amazon Fire HD 8

Amazon's Android-based tablet is more affordable than ever, which makes it a great gift for kids and adults. Magazines, games, and movies look amazing thanks to the Fire's new 8-inch, 189 pixels-per-inch screen and 1.3 GHz quad-core processor.

$89.99 | amazon.com

09

Marvel Legends Captain America Shield

It's not made of vibranium, but this life-sized replica looks great. From its glossy paintjob to its faux-leather straps, this shield is an ideal fit for both costumed arms and trophy walls

$99.99 | hasbro.com

Read / Listen

A.

B.

C.

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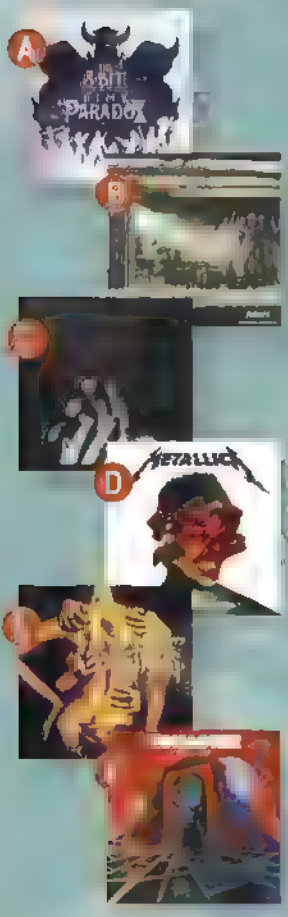
F.



A.

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F. Victorious Wolfmother

$100–$250

01

WD MyBook External Hard Drives
Our console hard drives are already bursting at the seams. Thankfully, Western Digital's range of external hard drives are compatible with Xbox One, turning them into gaming gold
$129.00 (4TB) | store.wdc.com

02

Mebo
This adorable robot can be controlled via a digital app. Its claw can pick up and move things, and the on-board camera lets you see through your robot's eyes, even if you're controlling it from the other side of the world
$149.99 | meborobot.com

SPOTLIGHT

Turtle Beach Elite Pro Headset
Turtle Beach's newest pair of headphones have been completely re-engineered from the ground up for eSports pros, but average Joes reap all the benefits. A patented ProSpace Glasses Relief system removes pressure where glasses wearers need it most. Meanwhile, 50mm Nanoclear speakers deliver crisp, distortion-free audio while Turtle Beach's professional-level microphone keeps you in constant communication with your friends while drowning out unwanted ambient audio. And since the Elite Pro is compatible with both consoles and PCs, it's the only headset you really need.
$199.00 | shop.turtlebeach.com

03

Pokémon Snorlax Bean Bag Chair

The lap of luxury is a Snorlax belly. This giant Pokémon-themed bean bag chair has a polyester casing and measures four feet tall by more than two feet wide.

$149.00 | thinkgeek.com

04

Square Enix Play Arts Kai Wonder Woman Figure

The breakout star of *Batman v Superman* wasn't either of the leads. This new Play Arts figure offers a gorgeous sculpt of DC Comics' Amazon warrior ahead of her solo film.

$149.00 | store.na.square-enix.com

Watch / Play

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B.

C.

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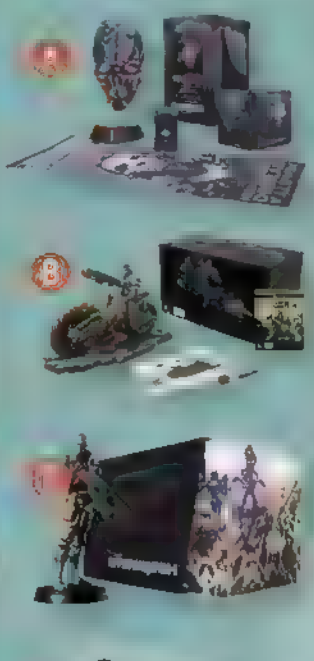

A.

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C.

D.

E.

$250–$1000

You'll need new pants after opening this

01

PS4 Pro Bundle
Sony's console update allows for upscaled 4K gaming and taps into a more vibrant range of HDR lighting. The PS4 also gives you access to Sony exclusives past and future like Uncharted 4, Horizon Zero Dawn, and God of War.
$399.00 | playstation.com

02

Xbox One S Gears of War 4 Limited Edition Bundle (2TB)
Microsoft's console refresh is 40 percent smaller, HDR ready, and offers 4K Blu-ray and video streaming. Plus it's the only console that plays titles like Gears of War 4 and Forza Horizon 3.
$449.00 | xbox.com

03

Geralt of Rivia
Prime 1 Studio's meticulously crafted, 26-inch statue of the White Wolf is almost as intimidating as the real thing. He'll protect any desk from monster incursions.
$769.00 | sideshowtoy.com

04

HTC Vive
Get a taste of the Holodeck today. Valve's room-scale VR creates an immersive experience that feels like the future of entertainment.
$799.00 | vive.com

$1000+

I'm probably insane for spending this much

01

Razer Blade Refresh

Razer's flagship laptop is still a game-playing beast. This year's update contains an Intel Core i7-6700HQ quad-core and an Nvidia GeForce GTX 1060, making this laptop VR-ready.

$1,799.00+ | razerzone.com

02

The Only Green Indoor Putting Green

For those who are serious about their short game, these handmade indoor putting greens are so customizable that they allow for up to 1 million break combinations.

$1,999.00 | brunswickbilliards.com

03

Whiskey Wood Chandelier

Not only do these hand-crafted chandeliers look like they belong in a Resident Evil mansion, but each rustic candelabra was steam-bent out of old whisky barrels.

$2,350.00 | heritage-handcrafted.com

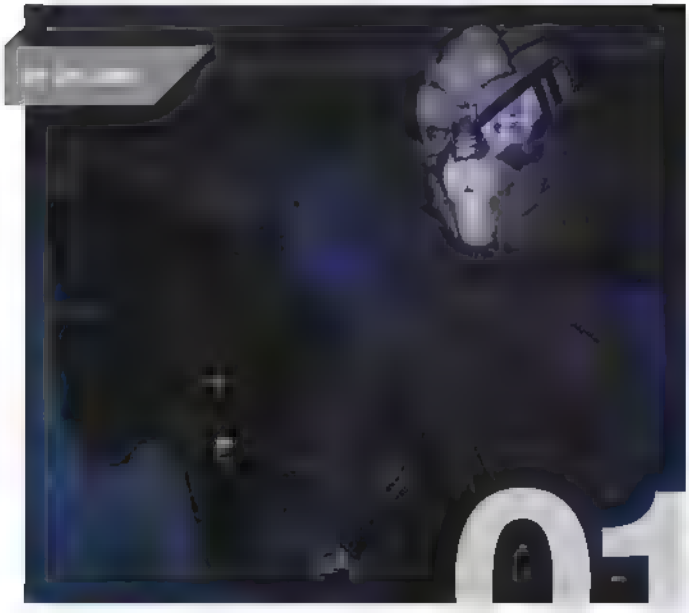
04

The Hobbit Limited Edition Pinball Machine

A built-in HD display accentuates the action of this limited edition pinball machine designed by Jersey Jack. You could hardly find a more fitting reward for Tolkien fans (beyond the One Ring, of course).

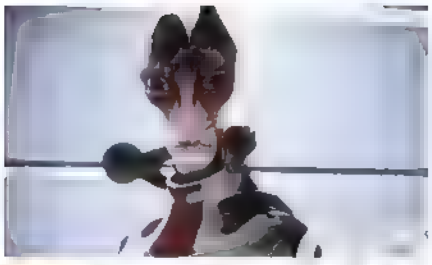
$8,500.00 | jerseyjackpinball.com

Mass Effect Companions



Garrus

Shepard couldn't ask for a better wingman than Garrus. He's collected, has an innate sense of justice, and carries his weight in a fight. Whether he's a romantic interest or just a friend, you know that Garrus has your back, no matter the odds. Plus, you won't find a more experienced calibrator in the whole galaxy.

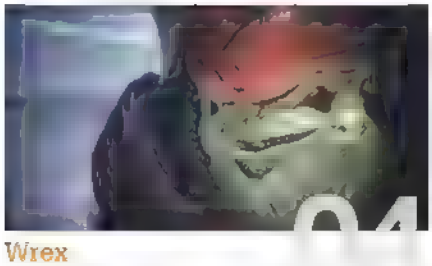


Mordin

Combining the smarts of a scientist with the pragmatism of a secret agent, Mordin can be both compassionate and ruthless. You may not like the things that he's done in the past, but neither does he. His search for redemption is among the best character arcs in the series.

Tali

Tali is a tech specialist, but her friendship is an even greater asset than her omni-tool. In a galaxy full of conflicting motives and hidden agendas, you can always trust Tali to be honest and put things in perspective. If you strive for just one ally's approval, make it hers.

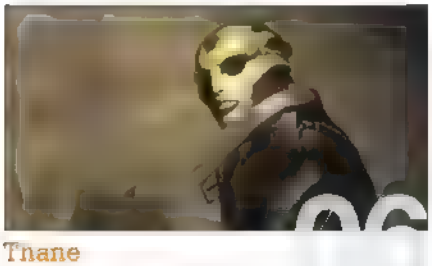


Wrex

You know you're a badass when you command the respect and loyalty of other badasses. Chief among those is Wrex, a no-nonsense Krogan mercenary and warlord. If you need anything brute-forced, Wrex is your guy – and afterward, you can nod at each other like it was no big deal.

Liara

Don't let Liara's apparent youth fool you – her sharp intellect and powerful biotics make her a formidable ally. She transitions from an academic to a powerful information broker, and when she's not pulling strings behind the scenes, you're lucky to have her by your side.



Thane

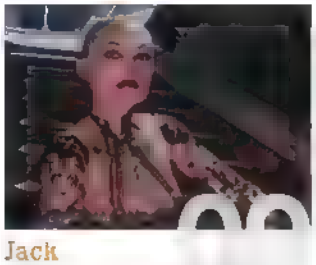
Assassins are often heartless killers, but Thane is different. He's a pious murderer, prone to praying over the bodies of his victims. His serene approach to life seems to contradict his bloody occupation, but his personal struggles define him more than the bodies in his wake.

Javik

The Prothears are a long-extinct benevolent race who invented advanced technology, right? As the sole surviving Prothean, Javik casts doubts on these assumptions. He is arrogant and unfriendly, but he will do anything for vengeance – and that makes him a powerful ally.

Legion

Despite the fact that Shepard destroys countless Geth, Legion proves that the synthetic race isn't inherently evil. Legion isn't exactly a single companion; it is the voice of the Geth collective, making it a uniquely alien companion in a galaxy full of strange creatures.

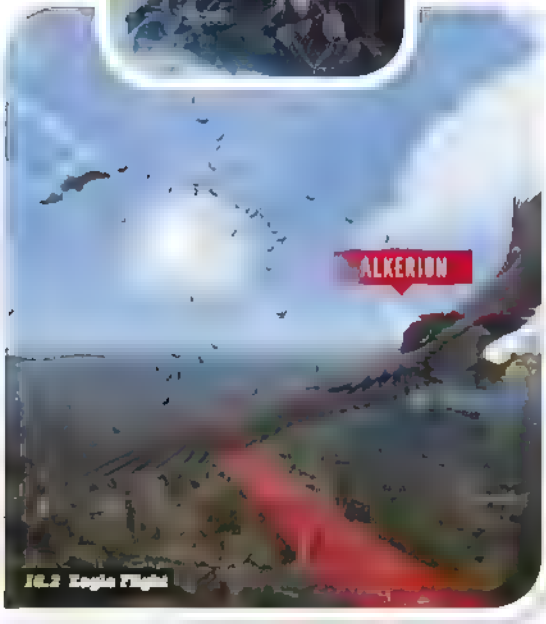


Jack

Her edgy persona may be abrasive, but under the surface, Jack is coping with a brutal history. As a result, she is quick to anger and slow to trust anyone – but if you take the time to befriend her, Jack's loyalty and unmatched biotic abilities are great assets in your struggle.

Joker

Even though Joker doesn't join Shepard on the battlefield, he is an entertaining and indispensable member of the crew. As the ace pilot of the Normandy, he is responsible for everyone's lives, but he bears that burden with a positive attitude and a sarcastic sense of humor.



December

01 The Game Awards

Geoff Keighley's video game award show returns and is airing on most gaming systems, including VR. The show hasn't had too many world-exclusive reveals lately, but it's always interesting to tune in to see what game walks away with the top honors of Game of the Year, as voted upon by a number of journalists.

02 New Releases

- Steep *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*
- Super Mario Maker *(3DS)*

03.1 PlayStation Experience 2016

Held in Anaheim, Calif., this year's PlayStation Experience expo should give us a look at games releasing in 2017 for PlayStation 4 and PlayStation VR. Last year's show was light on announcements but gave us another exclusive look at Uncharted 4. We're hoping Horizon Zero Dawn is the featured game this year.

03.2 IVX

In Marvel's latest limited series, *IVX*, the X-Men and Inhumans are at war. Mutants only have two weeks to live on the planet until it is uninhabitable for their kind. This battle will determine their future, as well as the place the Inhumans have within it.

06 New Releases

- Dead Rising 4 *(Xbox One, PC)*
- The Last Guardian *(PS4)*
- Shadow Tactics: Blades of the Shogun *(PC, Mac)*
- The Unspoken *(Rift)*
- VR Sports Challenge *(Rift)*
- Werewolves Within *(PSVR, Rift, Vive)*

13 New Releases

- Dragon Ball Fusions *(3DS)*

16.1 Rogue One: A Star Wars Story

Learn how the Rebellion stole the plans for the Death Star in today's theatrical release *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*. The film is directed by Gareth Edwards *(Godzilla)*, and stars Felicity Jones as Jyn Erso, and Ben Mendelsohn as Orson Krennic. Since none of these characters appear in any other Star Wars story, we're going to assume they are Vader fodder.

16.2 New Releases

- Eagle Flight *(PSVR, Rift, Vive)*

21 Justice League Vs. Suicide Squad

DC Comics hasn't revealed how The Watchmen are incorporated into its newly rebooted universe, but we do know that the Justice League wants to dismantle the government's Suicide Squad team. This of course can only be dealt with through an unnecessary battle that should be fun to watch unfold.

23 Assassin's Creed

For the first time in the better part of a decade, Ubisoft isn't releasing a full-fledged Assassin's Creed game this year. That doesn't mean fans won't get their fix; they just have to get it in a movie theater. *Assassin's Creed* graces the silver screen today with Michael Fassbender *(X-Men Apocalypse, Prometheus)* under the cloak. Could this be the first truly great video game movie? We'll have to wait to find out, but this question has been answered with a resounding "no" each time a game transitions to film. ✥

- **PLATFORM**
  PlayStation 4
  Xbox One • PC
- **STYLE**
  1-Player Role-Playing
  (4-Player Online)
- **PUBLISHER**
  Electronic Arts
- **DEVELOPER**
  BioWare
- **RELEASE**
  Spring

UNEXPLORED TERRITORY

Mass Effect Andromeda Charts A New Course

BY JOE JUBA

Over the course of five years and three games, players gradually invested themselves in the Mass Effect universe, with Commander Shepard at its center. Forming friendships, making enemies, performing galaxy-saving heroics – every action drew us deeper into Shepard's legacy and relationships. The persistence and evolution of those bonds are a critical part of Mass Effect's enormous success, but now it's time to start fresh. In the latest installment of BioWare's sci-fi saga, you leave Shepard's story behind and venture into the uncharted space of the Andromeda galaxy, where new planets, civilizations, and mysteries are waiting to be discovered. Surrounded by unfamiliar faces and dangerous foes, you are starting a new legend that will shape the fate of humanity.

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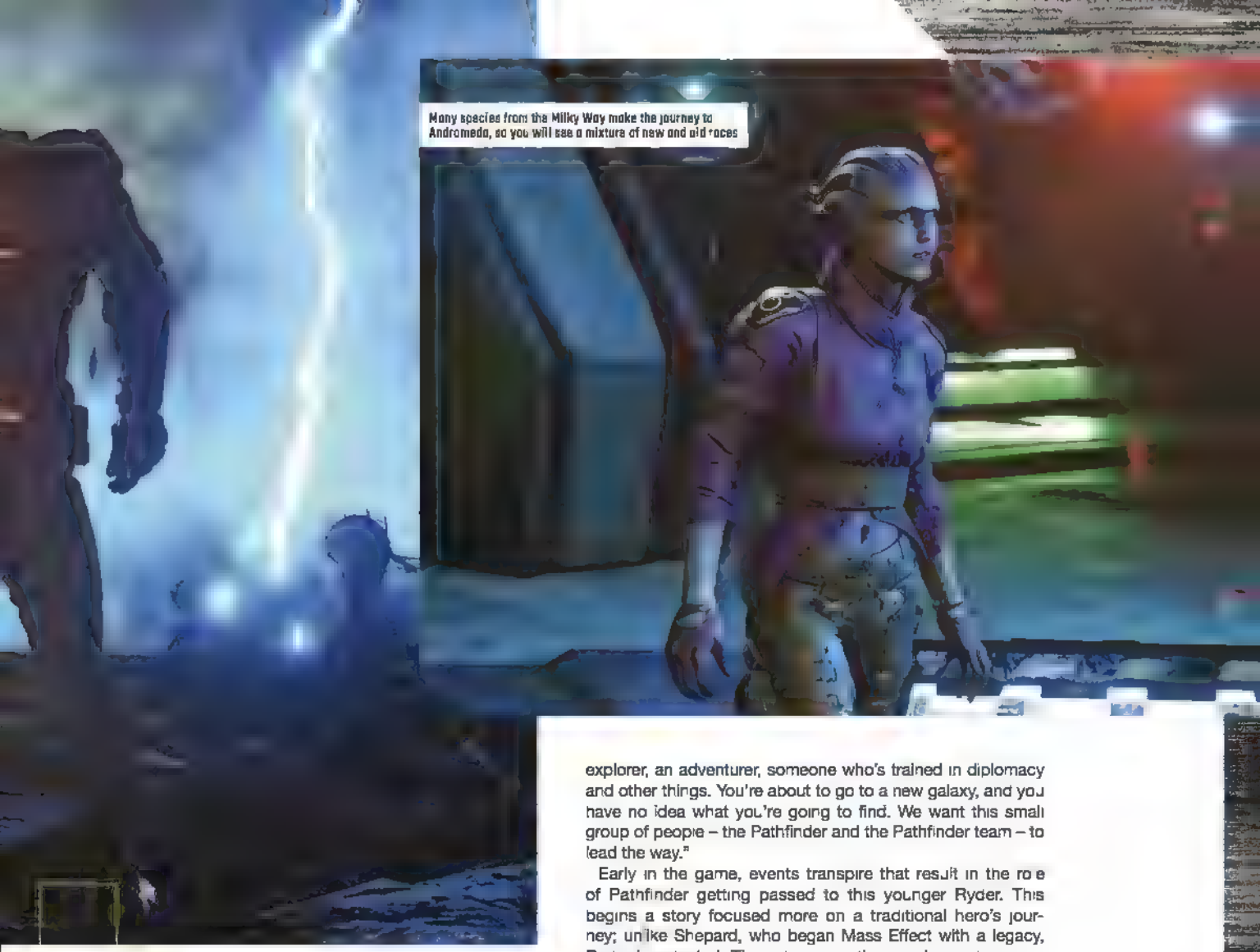
IN THE YEAR 2185

Around the time of Mass Effect 2 – practically no one knows the Reapers are coming. Unaware of the impending war, the various races of the Milky Way are living in relative harmony – a few factional rifts aside. In this largely peaceful environment, at the height of the galaxy's technical and social progress, several species come together for a remarkable endeavor: the Andromeda Initiative.

The ambitious project is focused on finding a new home beyond the confines of known space. It involves constructing four "arks," massive ships meant to support thousands of lives. Each one carries members of a different race – humans, turians, asari, salarians – on a centuries-long, one-way voyage to the Andromeda galaxy.

The Heleus cluster of Andromeda seems to contain an unlikely number of "golden worlds," planets whose climates and atmospheres could potentially support life. The goal of the Andromeda Initiative is to explore these worlds, determine if they can support new colonies, and eventually plant the seeds of a new civilization. These efforts are led by the four Pathfinders, exemplars of each race with unique abilities and extensive training.

Beyond the Pathfinders and their recon teams, thousands of other Andromeda Initiative volunteers remain in cryosleep, waiting to wake up to a new home. Everything they know back in the Milky Way will have changed by the time they arrive – wars waged and loved ones lost – but in Andromeda, they have the rare opportunity for a clean slate.



Many species from the Milky Way make the journey to Andromeda, so you will see a mixture of new and old races

A NEW START

Similar to the volunteers of the Andromeda Initiative, the team at BioWare is approaching this project as a new beginning, despite it being the fourth entry in its popular series. It retains many iconic elements from the previous games, but it also redefines what it means to be Mass Effect. The benefit of new technology, the focus on exploration, and the ambition to tell a different kind of story takes Mass Effect Andromeda in surprising directions.

"It was really important for us to not just make this Mass Effect 4," says creative director Mac Walters. "It's going to be almost five years [since ME 3] by the time this thing comes out; we want to say that this is going to be something fresh. This is a new start."

The first step to moving forward is creating a new hero. Until now, Mass Effect has been about Shepard – a space marine who was already a hero when players took control. For Andromeda, your character's legend has yet to be written. As the game opens, players select either Scott or Sarah Ryder – twin children of the human Pathfinder, the N7 Alec Ryder (voiced by actor Clancy Brown).

Regardless of which twin you choose, your Ryder is young, relatively inexperienced, and a member of a small scouting group that supports the Pathfinder. The trip to Andromeda on the ark is Ryder's first big adventure, though the character still has an array of useful skills. "You have to be able to handle a gun," Walters says. "You have to be able to fight. But we want you to be more than that; we want to you be an explorer, an adventurer, someone who's trained in diplomacy and other things. You're about to go to a new galaxy, and you have no idea what you're going to find. We want this small group of people – the Pathfinder and the Pathfinder team – to lead the way."

Early in the game, events transpire that result in the role of Pathfinder getting passed to this younger Ryder. This begins a story focused more on a traditional hero's journey; unlike Shepard, who began Mass Effect with a legacy, Ryder is untested. Through your actions and experiences in Andromeda, you determine the person Ryder will become.

So, does this mean Mass Effect is Ryder's story from now on? Not necessarily. BioWare acknowledges that it hopes to do more games in Andromeda, but it isn't approaching the series as a new trilogy centered on Ryder. "At the end of this, we want it to feel like a story has completed," Walters says. "Yes, for the universe, there's much more you could explore, and we want to tease that, but it feels like its own story. It's like, 'Great. I had my Ryder sibling becoming-a-hero story. What's next? Is it going to be Ryder? Is it going to be something else? Who knows?'"

The Nomad is like the Mako, but it's more fun to drive and doesn't have weaponry

More armor options make it easier for players to develop a unique look for their Hydra

Enemies serve a variety of roles in battle, from those meant to force you into cover to those intended to punish close-quarters combat

COMBAT MANEUVERS

One of the ways to direct Ryder's destiny is on the battlefield. As much as fans love the story and the characters of Mass Effect, the core gameplay is cover-based shooting. This pillar of the series has evolved with each installment, and Andromeda takes another major step forward.

Mass Effect 3 used two different combat systems: one built for the stop-and-go approach of single-player, and one built to accommodate the faster pace of online co-op. Mass Effect Andromeda closes the gap between these two systems, uniting them into one approach used for both modes. The traditional single-player feel now drifts more toward the kinetic encounters of multiplayer, accomplished through a variety of adjustments and additions that give players increased mobility and allow them to use their abilities with fewer limitations. Global cooldowns are replaced by individual timers, and all of your major powers are hot-keyed for quick use.

"For example, in single-player, we no longer do the ME 3 thing of pausing and aiming with the wheel up," says producer Fabrice Condominas. "It's much more dynamic and action-oriented. You can pause the game, but we don't encourage that as a part of the strategy."

Another change is the removal of sticky cover; your character automatically takes cover when you press up against an object, and leaves quickly with a tilt of the thumbstick. This means that you can easily seek refuge when you need it, but you have the flexibility to maneuver when the pressure mounts.

"There's the spectrum from hardcore cover shooter, where the best thing to do is never ever move, to Unreal Tournament, where you're leaping through the air and cover's not a concept you're concerned about," says lead designer Ian Frazier. "We are still a cover-based shooter; being in cover will let you get your shields back and be more accurate and not die. That being said, we are trying to get you moving a bit more."

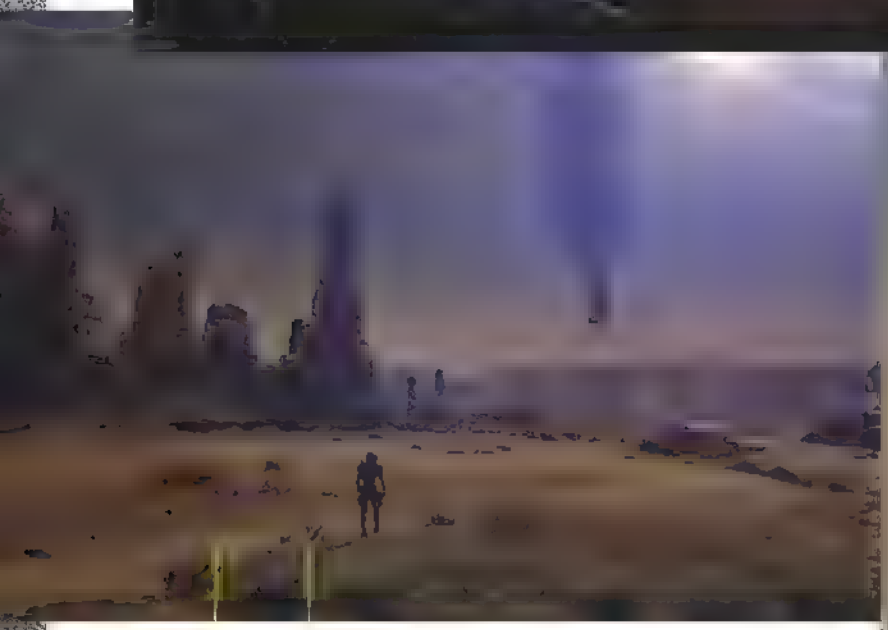
A large factor in that movement is the new jetpack, which gives players a wide array of options in any encounter. On the ground, it replaces the standard combat roll, allowing you to dash much faster. It can also be used to get over obstacles or fly to higher ground, making it easier to access strategic positions. Lastly, the jetpack has a hover function, so you can mount aerial attacks against enemies cowering behind cover. "If you jump and hover, then it gives you time to see the combat layout, even shoot at enemies in the air, but you've got a limit," Condominas says. "And the important part is how you learn to control that limit and use it tactically."

To give players the chance to use these options to the fullest, the team is crafting environments with more verticality, destructible cover, and angles of attack. You still see linear sections, but on the whole, expect fewer flat arenas peppered with cover that clearly telegraph a battle. For example, during the combat demo we saw, Ryder enters a two-level room full of hostile aliens – a new race called the Kett (see sidebar on page 57). The Pathfinder team is situated at the center of the upper tier. Switching to a sniper rifle, Ryder picks off a few of the Kett as they move up the walkway from the lower floor. As the enemies close in and flank the party, Ryder jumps over the ledge and hovers with the jetpack while shooting at the enemies on the level below. After landing, Ryder takes cover and orders the squadmates to come up on either side to lend support, all while focusing fire on a more powerful enemy (emitting an obscuring cloud) who was hanging back from the grunts. The strategy isn't complicated, but the seamlessness and fluidity of the execution is a new high for the series.

Before fans start thinking that the Mass Effect gunplay they love is being compromised or tainted, our impression from our hands-on time (see sidebar on page 63) is that Andromeda's combat has found a clearer identity than any of the previous installments. You still prioritize your targets and work as a team. You still prime and detonate combos with your abilities (a feature that is more clearly explained this time). In single-player, you still order your squadmates to take positions and attack. All of these key components remain in place, but they are supported by a foundation that encourages more experimentation and the use of a wider variety of abilities.

RUNS IN THE FAMILY

It should come as no surprise that you can customize the appearance of your Ryder. "There are definitely more customization options than there were in the trilogy," says producer Mike Gamble. However, you can also use these tools to modify the other members of the Ryder family. "You can't customize them to the same degree as your main character, but if you want to, you can customize both your dad and your sibling," says creative director Mac Walters. Want to ensure that there's a family resemblance? Want to be the black sheep? Go for it – or just accept the default options if you're not interested in that degree of manipulation.



BUILDING A HERO

Just because combat is even more action-oriented doesn't mean that the RPG mechanics are less deep. Character progression presents players with opportunities to make decisions about their capabilities and play style, and that's where Mass Effect Andromeda is more versatile than any of its predecessors.

Under the hood, the biggest change is the elimination of the traditional class system. Instead of selecting something like Infiltrator or Soldier when creating your character, you have access to the full range of abilities from all of the classes. If you want to mix and match skills previously associated only with tech, combat, or biotic character types, you can. Want a character who can use shockwave and incinerate? Give it a try and see how you like it. The goal is to let players try different approaches to combat without being locked into a single set of abilities as soon as they create their Ryder.

Your available abilities may not be restricted by a class choice, but that doesn't mean you can't specialize if you want to. In fact, once you invest enough points in certain categories of skills, you unlock a profile that provides bonuses tailored to your play style. This is where the familiar class names resurface; invest in biotic and combat powers to unlock the Vanguard profile, or focus on biotics exclusively to unlock Adept. All of the specialties that were previously designated classes are available as profiles, with one new one: A character who invests across multiple categories unlocks the Explorer profile.

"When you put enough points into a certain type of class, then you choose that profile and get perks," says producer Mike Gamble. "But where we're different is that you can constantly reallocate points to different profiles. In one mission, I can be an Infiltrator. In another mission, I can be a Sentinel." This reconfiguration is possible due to a narrative thread tied to Ryder's role as Pathfinder, and since you are able to refund your skill points and try different builds, you are free to experiment without worrying about wasting an opportunity. This freedom means you can get a taste of multiple gameplay approaches without starting multiple characters, though you certainly don't have to.

"People tend to stick to certain kinds of characters, especially in RPGs. Even without class systems, they already know what they want to do," Condominas says. "And they can absolutely do that. I think they will play the way they want, with a couple specific, targeted tactical places where they will choose to switch."

Your ability to customize Ryder goes beyond skill-point allocation. By independently placing armor in slots for your head, chest, shoulders, and legs, you can optimize your stats and change your appearance. This was also present in previous Mass Effect games to a limited degree, but the impact is more significant in Andromeda. You aren't just choosing between

MEET THE KETT

One of the thrills of Mass Effect Andromeda is encountering the aliens of the Heleus cluster – especially since these species are new to players and the characters themselves. "In the Mass Effect trilogy, all of the first contact stuff had already happened, and it was just the wrapping up," says creative director Mac Walters. "We kind of skipped over that initial part. In this one, we don't want to skip over that. We want players to feel 'I'm the one who doesn't fit in here. I'm the one who doesn't belong.'"

Considering that, the team at BioWare doesn't want to reveal too much about the new cultures players encounter in Andromeda. However, the team did unveil the visual look of the Kett, the first non-Milky Way aliens Ryder and the Pathfinder team encounter.

In our demo of Andromeda, we saw Ryder fighting Kett forces, so they could be an antagonistic race. However, Commander Shepard fought just about every alien possible in the trilogy, so the Kett's hostility may be more about individual groups than the race as a whole. "We wanted the Kett to be foreboding, but certainly not ugly," says art director Joel MacMillan. "You still want to be able to empathize with these guys. We have a lot of stories we want to tell with the race, so despite how foreboding or scary they are, you still want opportunities to show them in an empathetic way."

a round shoulder or a square shoulder. "I think the visual differences are more important in this one," Condom nas says "You can change the general silhouette. You also have casual clothes as before. But we're still talking about the same technology and the same people building the armors, so there is obviously a visual consistency, but the range of visual differences is broader."

Even though the events of Andromeda take place centuries after the original trilogy, players have access to familiar-looking armors, weapons, and vehicles, because that's what was loaded onto the arks before departure. For instance, you still see Avenger assault rifles and Black Widow sniper rifles. You can also obtain and use a wider variety of melee weapons, like swords and hammers. While the story naturally justifies the decision to incorporate Milky Way technology, this familiarity is also important to retaining the Mass Effect identity. "If I came in as a fan and it was like, 'And now 600 years in the future everything is completely different,' I think I would feel a little disenfranchised from that," Walters says.

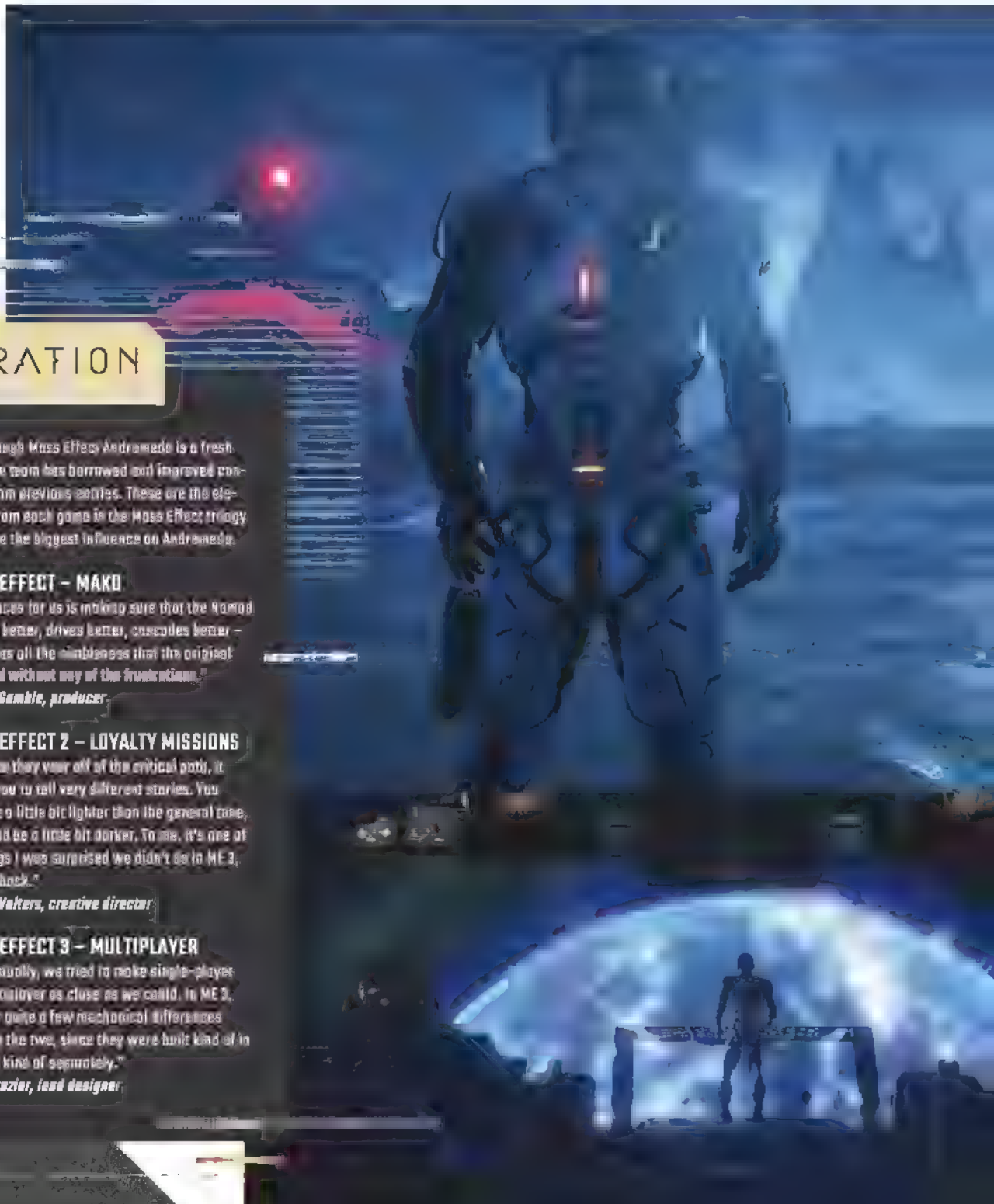
The jetpack and additional melee weapons are just a couple of ways Mass Effect Andromeda is moving the gameplay forward

SPACE PIONEERS

When the human ark *Hyperion* arrives in the Heleus cluster after a 600-year flight, the situation is not as expected. Instead of the ark's assigned golden world (designated "Habitat 7") being a verdant paradise full of possibility, it is surrounded by a dangerous energy cloud and its atmosphere is volatile. The crew cannot contact the other arks or the Nexus – a forward command center (with a multi-species staff) that arrived in the cluster early to prepare for the arks' arrival. The scenario is grim, but despite all of the things going wrong, getting to the bottom of the problem boils down to a simple mandate: explore.

What happened in the last 600 years? What are the motivations of the apparently hostile Kett? Are there other unfamiliar races in the Heleus cluster? The answers to these questions are revealed as you progress through the story, and you do that by getting your boots on the ground and seeing the new things Andromeda has to offer. As Pathfinder, Ryder's primary job is examining the golden worlds up close and securing humanity's survival.

This spirit of exploration is the core of what makes Mass Effect Andromeda different from its predecessors. You aren't just seeing contained, linear slices of the worlds you land on; you're driving across them and delving underneath them to



INSPIRATION

Even though Mass Effect Andromeda is a fresh start, the team has borrowed and improved concepts from previous games. These are the elements from each game in the Mass Effect trilogy that have the biggest influence on Andromeda.

MASS EFFECT – MAKO

"A big focus for us is making sure that the Nomad handles better, drives better, cascades better – that it has all the nimbleness that the original Mako did without any of the frustrations."

— Mike Gamble, producer

MASS EFFECT 2 – LOYALTY MISSIONS

"Because they veer off of the critical path, it allows you to tell very different stories. You could be a little bit lighter than the general tone, you could be a little bit darker. To me, it's one of the things I was surprised we didn't do in ME 3, looking back."

— Mac Walters, creative director

MASS EFFECT 3 – MULTIPLAYER

"Conceptually, we tried to make single-player and multiplayer as close as we could. In ME 3, you saw quite a few mechanical differences between the two, since they were built kind of in tandem, kind of separately."

— Ian Frazier, lead designer

uncover their secrets. Planets feature wide-open maps peppered with colonies, ruins, minerals, and other points of interest to investigate. From what we saw, the shift seems similar to what the Dragon Age series experienced, trading the limited environments of Dragon Age II for the expansive open world of Inquisition – but the Andromeda team isn't using that terminology.

"The reason I don't like 'open world' is that then people ask, 'Is it a sandbox game?'" Walters says. "No, it's not a sandbox game. It is open-world in the sense that you can choose to follow the icons on the map, you can mine, you can drive off into the distance because something looks good. That's part of the freedom."

"We're not a sandbox game, and we're not trying to be a sandbox game," Gamble says. "We're trying to be Mass Effect."

However you classify it, Mass Effect Andromeda has the largest footprint of any BioWare game to date. Between critical path levels, optional planets, and hubs, players have a lot of ground to cover. That means bringing back a controversial aspect of the original Mass Effect: an all-terrain vehicle capable of conveying you across alien landscapes.

In the first game, players undertook missions to explore uncharted worlds, driving a military vehicle called the Mako across planet surfaces. This part of the game proved divisive; some players enjoyed the sense of discovery, while others complained about the vast and largely barren terrain. "Some people loved the Mako, some people hated the Mako," Walters says. "For us, we really wanted to solve a lot of the problems we didn't solve that first time around."

Part of the solution is ensuring that the Nomad is fun to drive. This means tweaking the handling, camera, and sense of speed to make being behind the wheel satisfying. In fact, members of the Need For Speed team recently took a look at the Nomad mechanics and offered BioWare some additional tips on that front. The Nomad is also versatile; it can boost and jump, making it easier to traverse problem areas. It doesn't have any weapons, but you can upgrade its stats (like speed) and customize its appearance, giving you a greater sense of ownership and progression. But the vehicle itself is less important than what you do with it.

Expect a mixture of on-foot exploration and driving around in the Nomad

KEEPING BUSY

The other part of making exploration rewarding is giving players enough to do on the planet surface. It isn't about finding a handful of mineral nodes or nearly identical outposts; the team wants players to be pulled in several equally tempting directions. "There are combat-related encounters, puzzle-related encounters, narrative-related encounters, and a lot of things will happen that add more depth to the critical path," Gamble says. "Some of the stuff will be entirely optional."

We saw this philosophy applied to a desert world called Elaaden. This planet was flagged as a possible habitat, but the extreme heat and lack of water make the prospect of long-term survival poor. Ryder can be pointed to Elaaden in numerous ways – in this case, a krogan requested that the Pathfinder team land on the planet to investigate a lost krogan colony ship. You could follow that questline, or you could just hop in the Nomad, start driving, and see what you find.

Despite being set 600 years after the trilogy, some of Ryder's arsenal is similar to Shepard's

In the sands of Elaaden, like most exploration-focused planets, a wide variety of activities await. You might encounter two factions fighting, or resources to gather, but that's just the beginning. One of your priorities is tracking down drop zones for forward stations. This technology, dropped from orbit, flags nearby points of interest, allows you to change your loadout, and acts as a fast-travel point. This establishes a foothold in uncharted territory, which is important since danger lurks around every corner. You can't survive in the extreme heat of Elaaden for long without seeking cover, and you may even encounter other localized dangers, like acid pools or burning wrecks. "There's definitely risk," Walters says. "If you drive your Nomad in the wrong direction, it's going to take damage. If it blows up, you're either walking, or if you're in it, dying."

During our tour of the planet, we see one structure referred to as the Flophouse, though the Pathfinder team doesn't go inside, because a fight would certainly ensue. "Most planets have at least one enemy base on them," Walters says. "These bases are pretty lengthy to take out, so if you approach one, you want to be prepared before you go into it. It's fun, because there's a combination of systemic and scripted stuff in there. If you tip off too many enemies, the alarms start going off and you have to shut them off. And there's usually narrative tied around it."

Another thing you find on some planets: super-bosses. These encounters may not be winnable when they are first available, but that should be obvious to players before they jump in with guns blazing. "There's a final, 'If you're ready, good luck' kind of boss," Gamble says. "We have a lot of other things like that, where you'll know that you're not ready for this, but you'll know that you'll want to come back."

Vaults, like the one seen in the trailer shown at the PS4 Pro event in September, are also found on important worlds. Their exact purpose and function remain mysterious, other than they are critical to your success in Andromeda. As for the creatures called Remnant that the trailer showed inside the vaults, they seem more like mummies guarding a tomb than anything else.

All throughout these various pursuits, Ryder finds things that no human has ever seen before, from rocks to technology. Using a scanner, you can send this data back for analysis (Ryder has an implant that allows for direct communication with the mission computer) and get rewarded for your discovery. The process has a cumulative effect, so the more objects you scan, the sooner you have access to benefits like new technology.

"Scanning is one of the most important exploration tools you'll have in the game," Condominas says. "You're in a new galaxy, there are a lot of things where you just have no clue what's going on. The scanner is a way to capture what is in your environment, send the information back to the Tempest to analyze it, and find those clues that we add to the codex, which might also give you access to crafting pieces, for example."

That's right, crafting. You can obtain blueprints for weapons and armor and make them for yourself. This isn't just about a few different ammo types or weapon mods like Mass Effect 1; you can create a wide array of items, including things that no

ALLY PROFILES

You can't have a Mass Effect game without interesting characters, though BioWare isn't saying much yet regarding Ryder's companions, their reasons for being in Andromeda, or their romantic availability. However, we got a general overview on two members of your entourage.

PEEBEE

This asari came to Andromeda on the Nexus, but then went off adventuring on her own. She is a lone wolf, and isn't interested in teamwork so much as what Ryder can lend her to. PeeBee has a bubbly personality, she's smart, and not particularly concerned with norms or social niceties.

LIAM

Arriving in Andromeda aboard the Hyperion, Liam is a member of the Pathfinder team. He has a history as a police officer, so he serves in a security role. He's idealistic and enthusiastic, and his light attitude adds levity to situations. He's hopeful for humanity's future, and supportive of Ryder.

The design of the *Tempest* might call the *Normandy* to mind, but Ryder's ship is smaller and faster – ideal for scouting missions

one from the Milky Way has encountered before. "The narrative setting means that you have alien races with new tech, and I think it's compelling for players to craft new stuff," Condominas says. "That's part of the roots of the RPG system."

With so many options and incentives, players won't quickly run out of things to do while exploring. A majority of the quests and activities on each planet resolve on that world, but not all of them do. That means a mission eventually points you someplace new and undiscovered, and you head for the stars to reach your next destination.

HEADQUARTERS IN THE SKY

With the exception of Commander Shepard, the *Normandy* was the most consistent element of the Mass Effect trilogy. That makes the iconic vessel a tough act to follow, but Ryder's ship, the *Tempest*, has a shot at carving out a place in the hearts of fans.

"It was important to harken back visually to the *Normandy*, because it was such a fan favorite," says art director Joel MacMillan. "It makes sense to bring that stuff forward where you can." Though it looks similar, the *Tempest* is functionally different from other ships players have seen in Mass Effect. "She's much smaller, faster, fleeter – it's a scout ship," says space lead Jessica Hara Campbell. "It's smaller and more intimate. It's meant to feel more confined. When you move through the ship, it's seamless; there are no more loading screens to go from level to level. You can move through the entirety of the ship."

Ryder can freely visit the various areas of the *Tempest* – the garage where the Nomad is parked, the Pathfinder's quarters, the galley where you can reallocate your skill points. However, the center of operations is the bridge – and it's also where players find the new version of the galaxy map. This is your gateway to the Heleus cluster, and the team has made some modifications to make you feel immersed in your interplanetary exploits.

"When you are taking control of the galaxy map, rather than piloting a little ship around and going to a place, we're actually giving you that experience of moving through the systems, of going toward a planet or a ship," Hara Campbell says. "When you back out, you are at that location; outside the window, you will be in orbit and see that planet or whatever you're investigating."

You don't pilot the ship manually, but the process of traveling is more fluid, putting you closer to the journey. For instance, you might be orbiting Habitat 7 (which you can see out of the bridge window), then open the galaxy map and set the destination to Elaaden. You witness this journey from your position on the bridge, then see the orange planet out the window as you arrive. From there, you can scan the planet and send out probes if you find any objects of interest. Alternatively, if you want to explore, you can head to the garage, hop in the Nomad, and send it down to the surface. In addition to looking cool, sewing this process together removes the need for abrupt cuts that take you out of the experience.

"We're trying to make the transitions as seamless as possible, so that it isn't you hitting the 'land' button and then the screen goes black and then you wait for two minutes and then you're standing on the surface," says technical director Harold Chaput. "We're trying to push this envelope; there is a landing sequence, there is walking off the ship on to the planet, there is this connection. I think we've really closed the distance there."

Ryder obviously spends a lot of time aboard the *Tempest* traveling and planning, but many players are less interested in touring the facilities and more interested in where they can find their favorite party members. Once again, each one sticks close to an appointed area. After all, you need to be able to find them when want to have a heart-to-heart chat.

THE PERSONAL STORIES

For all of its story twists and combat encounters, the characters are what Mass Effect fans are most passionate about. "What I started to realize over the course of the trilogy was yes, certainly, the plot is important," Walters says. "The setting is important. But it's the characters that people love. It's the characters that people remember ..that's really where it needs to start." The team at BioWare knows that connecting with (and romancing) the crew is a major draw for many fans, and expanding that concept is an important part of Mass Effect Andromeda.

"By my count right now, if you include squad, crew, and light romances, we have more romances than we've ever had before," Walters says. "And the relationships themselves are all more in-depth than they were before."

One of the most significant connections you can make is with your sibling. When you select your Ryder, the other Ryder twin doesn't cease to exist; they remain in cryosleep for a while due to complications with the awakening process. Even after awakening, they aren't capable of joining you in battle, but you can still interact with them and build that relationship.

"We do tie them into the critical path," Walters says. "There are a few moments when you need to interact with your twin. The rest of it is all optional, tied to what we call the Ryder family story ..a lot of who you are is exposed through your interactions with either your sibling or through finding out about your dad and your family." Though BioWare is evasive about the significance of this quest thread, it is confident that the details are a major factor in what differentiates Ryder's tale from a traditional hero's journey.

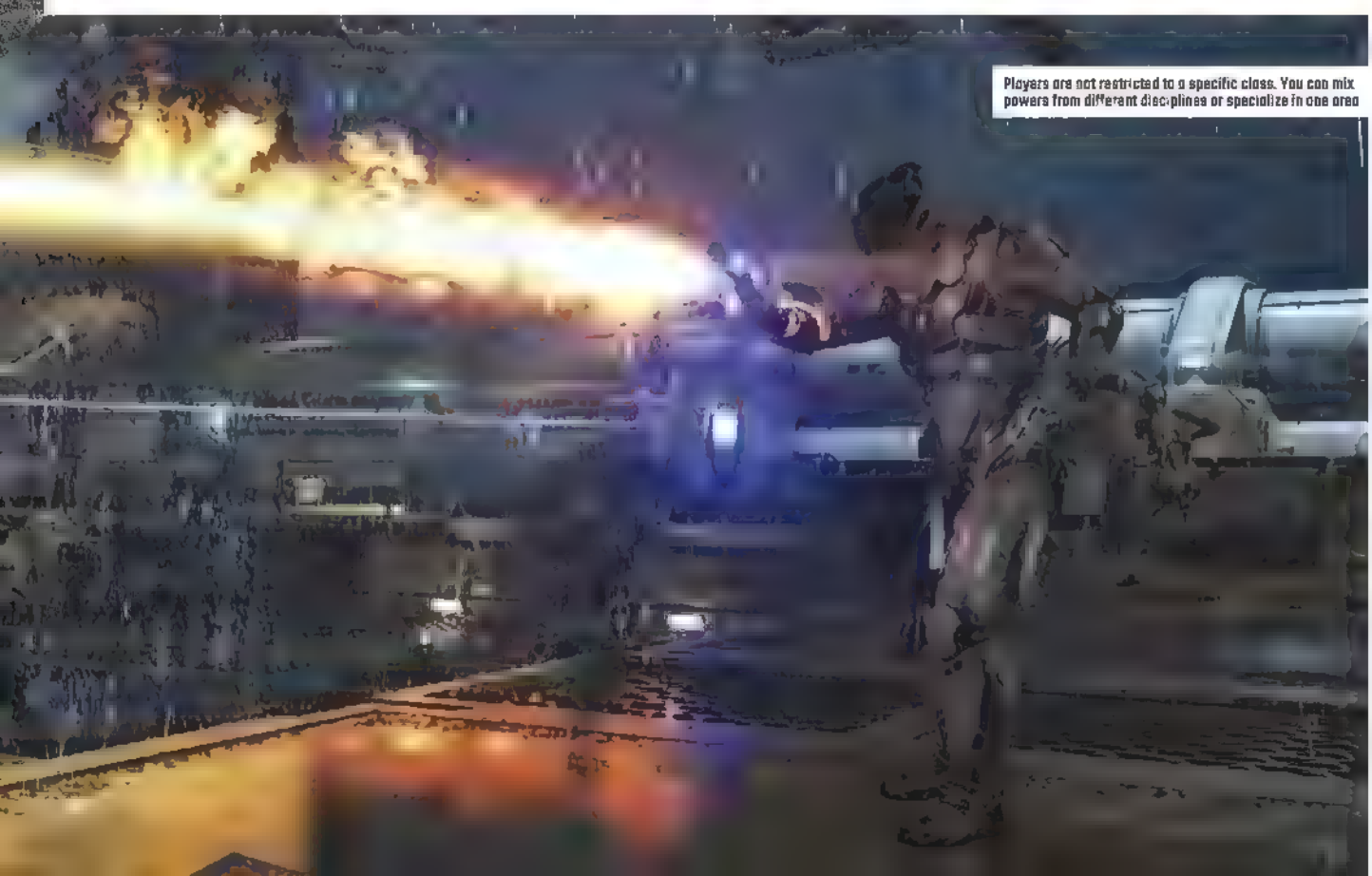
Your other squadmates have their own stories to share, and part of that involves the return of loyalty missions – a concept resurrected from Mass Effect 2. "I loved the loyalty missions," Walters says. "As a writer, one of the things I loved was the freedom to say, 'I know this character is coming along,' so they can carry a lot of the narrative." They serve a similar purpose in Andromeda – though they don't impact the ending this time. Instead, these are shorter missions (relative to critical path quests), but they give the team more opportunities to have fun with the dialogue and experiment with the gameplay.

Only Liam and PeeBee have been confirmed as allies as of now, but every companion has one of these special quests dedicated to resolving a personal matter. As in Mass Effect 2, triggering loyalty missions is all about getting to know the people around you. "If you don't investigate and check in on them, they're not going to get to know you," Walters says. "This is a hero story, but it's also a team bonding story. You're coming together for the first time to do this. If you want to be the loner who takes your crew out to use as meat shields, that's fine, but you're not going to advance those storylines."

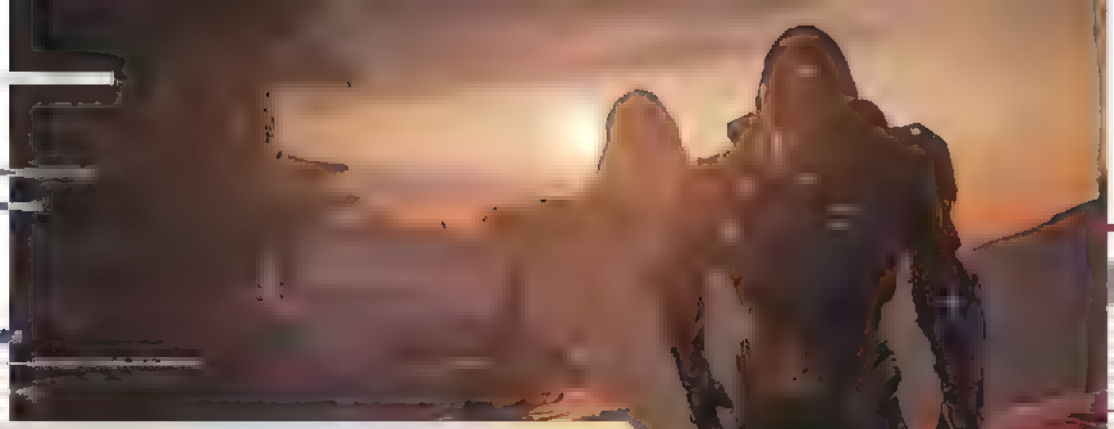
On the other side of the spectrum, many fans are probably looking forward to getting insight into the backstory and personality of their crew members. Some may already be speculating about which character they want to strike up romance with. In Andromeda, the scope of your romantic options have broadened significantly – it's not just about making the right dialogue decisions before a certain point in the story.

"There should be some people who just want to hop in the sack immediately," Walters says. "There should be people who are interested in a long-term relationship. There are people who aren't interested in romance at all. Just because someone has a romance doesn't mean they have a longer relationship arc with you. And the ones that aren't romanceable should have just as interesting and in-depth an arc as the ones who are."

In other words, all of your interactions should pay off, romantic or otherwise. Your reward for the time you invest in your characters isn't always a tawdry cinematic; considering the unique bonds Ryder forges, the crew has plenty of opportunities to surprise you. "We are a character-focused game, and we've done a lot to put character into the game," says cinematic director Ken Thain. "I'm making sure that we have – not just in culminations, per se, but even in relationships – particular moments with these characters that are unique. Our fans call out a lot to shooting bottles on the Citadel with Garrus – there's a lot more of that in Andromeda."



Players are not restricted to a specific class. You can mix powers from different disciplines or specialize in one area



MULTIPLAYER EVOLVING

Traditionally, single-player games often get ridiculed when a sequel attempts to add a multiplayer mode. However, Mass Effect 3 tapped into something special with its cooperative multiplayer, with fast-paced combat, rewarding progression, and a narrative framework that kept players coming back – even those who didn't normally engage with online features.

Multiplayer returns for Mass Effect Andromeda. While that seems like a natural choice, its impact on the combat design for the single-player is surprising. Not only does balancing multiplayer allow for diverse encounters in the campaign, but it also informs the mechanics and feel of the battles in general. "A lot of what makes our multiplayer tick is what you see in single-player," says lead designer Ian Frazier. "It's the carryover changes to combat: being more action-oriented, being smoother, sticky-less cover system, the jump, the hover, having melee weapons."

We played Andromeda's multiplayer during our time at BioWare Montreal, and all of those changes are in full effect. The controls feel responsive, and putting powers on individual cooldown timers (rather than one global timer) makes it easier to set up combos and strategize. For example, an Adept can single-handedly prime a combo with singularity, and then detonate it with shockwave immediately. The most difficult adjustment was not actively entering cover; we kept tapping the button by instinct, activating the jetpack – but there's just a question of getting acclimated to the new control scheme. The action itself is fast and fun, and while it doesn't feel like a complete revolution, the mechanical changes seem to favor power and movement rather than hunkering down in a single fortification.

Even with the alterations, the structure feels familiar. Like Mass Effect 3's multiplayer, players cooperatively fight off enemies in waves (the exact number is still in flux), facing foes of increasing difficulty until they reach the end. Upon completing a full round (or failing), the appropriate XP and currency is awarded, which can be spent to upgrade powers and buy equipment packs, respectively.

"The core of it is built on ME 3, because it was successful, and people seemed to really enjoy it," Frazier says. "So, yes, it's a card-based economy. You earn credits and XP through playing the game naturally. You can unlock card packs with credits, and you can also purchase them with real-world money, but there is nothing that you have to spend real-world money for. Everything can be earned through normal play."

Players set the difficulty, map, and enemy as before, but they can also use new match modifiers to make rounds easier or harder, which changes the flow of the rewards. For instance, if you turn on a modifier that gives your group decreased health, you get a bigger payoff at the end of the match. If you activate one that increases your damage, the reward is less. However, you can also stack modifiers to create entertaining match variants; turning on decreased health and increased damage effectively makes you a team of glass cannons. BioWare is also planning to regularly release custom-crafted missions that use unique modifiers players can't select themselves.

The multiplayer is once again set within the fiction of the campaign. You and your friends are the Apex Force, a militia strike team from the Nexus defending the interests of the Milky Way races. That means you probably won't be fighting factions like the Reth and Collectors anymore. Instead, you face more Andromeda-appropriate foes, like the Kett. "Each faction has a different philosophy behind it in terms of what you're supposed to do," Frazier says. "This group might be more shield-heavy, that group might be more armored, and there are different powers and weapons and skills that are more suited to taking out enemies that are shielded or armored or what have you. Some groups, there are more benefits to high-skill play, like headshots. There might be another faction that is more about brute force and closing in, because they're harder to deal with if you stay at range." Alongside the factions, new races and classes are among the biggest changes from the last installment. However, BioWare isn't going into detail on those parts yet.

Another major addition is a third currency beyond XP and credits: mission funds. Obtained by finishing BioWare's aforementioned custom-crafted missions with unique modifiers, this currency allows players to buy items directly rather than being at the mercy of the random card packs – but there's a catch. Only a limited number of items are available in the store at any one time, and the stock changes on a regular basis. Even so, seeing what you're getting before you buy it will be a relief for fans who didn't like buying packs blind. The usefulness of this new currency doesn't stop there, but we have to wait longer to find out why. "Mission funds have other uses that we just can't talk about yet," Frazier says. "It has ramifications going out into the rest of the game."

If you choose to engage with the multiplayer, you see benefits in your single-player campaign. "There is a distinctive bridge between single-player and multiplayer," Frazier says. "It absolutely exists... It does not affect your story. Players who want to engage in multiplayer can get advantages in single-player from doing that, but it will not change the ending of your game." This approach is somewhere between Mass Effect 3 (where multiplayer affected your ending) and Dragon Age Inquisition (where it was completely divorced from single-player).

Last but not least, BioWare wants players to have a reason to keep playing multiplayer in Mass Effect Andromeda. That's why it implemented prestige mechanics. "There are several different types of characters in multiplayer, and each time you finish a match, you earn your regular XP, but you also earn prestige XP," Frazier says. "That goes to every character in that type. All the tanky characters, for instance, might be a group that earn prestige XP together. And there's a different benefit for each type of character. Let's say you play three tanky characters – it could be three different sizes – you earn enough prestige XP to level up. Now you get a health benefit to all of your characters – not just the ones of that type."

If you want to play long-term, you can continue building up these passive bonuses by playing a variety of characters, reaping the rewards for your dedication. Mass Effect 3's multiplayer already had lasting appeal, and it looks like Mass Effect Andromeda has the systems in place to hold your attention even longer.

NEW CHOICES

Compelling characters and in-depth interactions are undoubtedly part of Mass Effect's core appeal. However, when making Andromeda, the team looked carefully at many other iconic elements of the game that some fans may consider sacred. This process resulted in a surprising decision: the removal of the paragon/renegade system.

"I always felt that paragon/renegade was extremely tied to Shepard, and it's not Shepard's story anymore," Walters says. "If we are playing these new characters, but still making paragon/renegade choices, how could we not be perceived as being Shepard?"

Despite its history in the series, the paragon/renegade mechanic could feel like a relic of a bygone age of gaming. With roots in Knights of the Old Republic's division of choices into Light Side and Dark Side, the paragon/renegade options are part of a tradition of black-and-white decisions that video games have grown beyond. "People wanted a little more nuance and subtlety," Walters says. "And that's what we want to go for – give you more opportunity to express yourself with different tones, but not necessarily give you some sort of binary meter by which the whole world judges you." The result is the freedom to add more clarity to your decisions and options; Ryder can agree with someone without it being a paragon decision, and disagree without being considered renegade.

To add some additional RPG flavor, dialogue options can now be associated with particular tones: heart, head, professional, and casual. They aren't always necessarily good or evil, and they don't sway a meter in one direction or the other. Instead, they let you shape Ryder's personality through dialogue, leaving

THE PS4 PRO

When Sony unveiled the Playstation 4 Pro model at an event in September, Mass Effect Andromeda had a starring role. The gameplay demo showed off the capabilities of the new piece of hardware, but also gave fans a look at how gorgeous this game can look. We asked technical director Harold Campe about the process of getting the demo ready for the showcase:

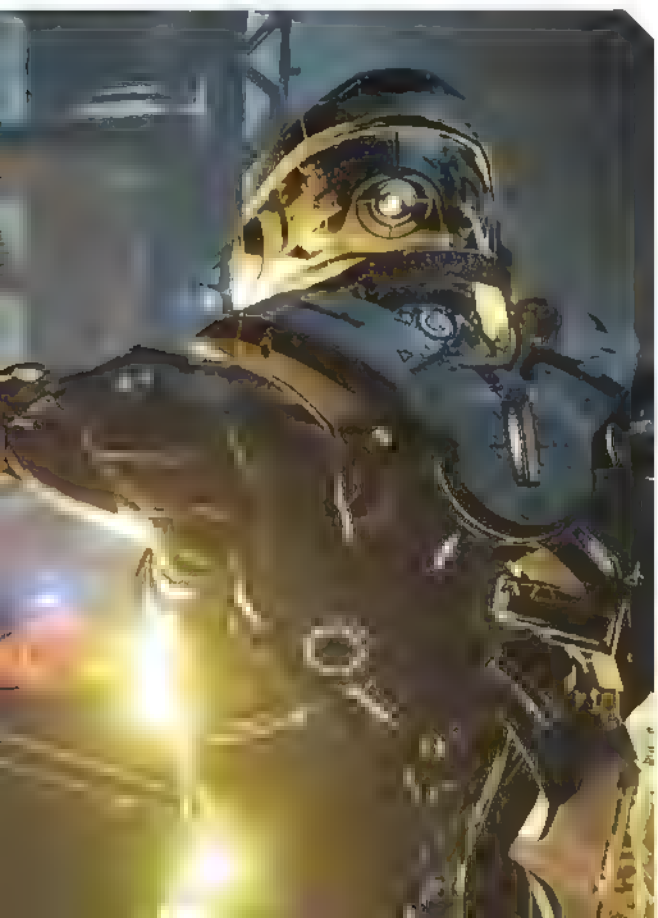
"We didn't design the game with PS4 Pro in mind; it came on the scene as we were making the game. So when it came time to bring it to this new platform, make it look as good as possible, demo it – it wasn't totally clear how to get from A to B. But the teams jumped into it and really pulled out all stops and found ways to make it look great... I think the lesson was, ask us for more. In a lot of ways, that was the programming team's way of saying, 'Bring it. What else have you got?' I don't want to say it was easy, because that under-sells the team, but I think it happened a lot smoother than a lot of people thought it would."

Accessing important locations usually involves some kind of puzzle or combat encounters

you free to select the options you like without worrying about unintended consequences. "These choices are more flavorful," Thain says. "So you don't think you're having a role-playing moment and someone ends up dead, and you didn't realize that was a choice."

Fortunately, you are also still able to interrupt conversations with various actions, even without the paragon/renegade framework. They are called "narrative actions" rather than "interrupts," and they allow players another avenue to make choices beyond the dialogue wheel. Instead of seeing red or blue icons flash, you see a prompt on-screen (like "shoot") with a limited time to act. That way, you have less ambiguity when you're weighing whether or not to pull the trigger.

"A lot of the decisions we've created, what we've been aiming for is that there is no obvious right or wrong," Walters says. "There are pros and con, and you'll just have to play it the way you want. There's no military system. There's no justice system, per se. No one's going to judge you, so it's on you on whether you can live with the consequences."



THE FUTURE

Looking beyond Mass Effect Andromeda's release might seem premature, but since the last three games were positioned as a trilogy, fans naturally want to know more about the Andromeda series and BioWare's plans for its future.

The team isn't making any promises right now, but Mass Effect Andromeda certainly leaves the door open, and the team seems eager to continue down this path. "In any creative process, there's all the things you want to do, and there's all the things you can do," Chaput says. "And those limitations are heartbreaking, but form is freedom. If we had infinite time, then that's exactly how long it would take to finish the game. I think there's a whole lot of value to being able to say, 'There are limits on this. Pencils down.' And then we choose to fight another day."

Until that day comes, you can extend your playtime with Mass Effect Andromeda by playing New Game+ (which lets you change your gender this time). You can also count on post-release updates for the multiplayer mode enticing you to jump back in once the single-player campaign is complete.

Will you have multiple endings to aim for? For now, that's a question BioWare is deliberately avoiding. "We want to leave the ending, and what we're doing with it, as a surprise," Gamble says. "This is a different type of story, so it will be something different than the trilogy. We can't wait to hear what fans think." After the controversy surrounding the ending of Mass Effect 3, this reluctance to reveal too much is understandable. Regardless of how the final moments unfold, Mass Effect Andromeda appears to provide plenty of replayability for those who want to stay immersed in Ryder's world.

"Players are insatiable, and bless them for that," says BioWare general manager Aaryn Flynn. "They love content. When they love the lore and love the setting and love the fiction that they're going into, their appetites are boundless ...As much as it becomes difficult to manage these things, I think that it's a joy to be able to do that for players and to give them those things. And to say, 'Okay, you want more? Let's give you more.'"

We definitely understand where the players are coming from. After what we saw and played during our time at BioWare Montreal, we can't wait for more ourselves.

For a closer look at the characters, more info about multiplayer, and exclusive interviews with the team at BioWare, head to gameinformer.com/andromeda

Red Dead Redemption 2

Rockstar returns to the wild west

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One

» [redacted]
1-Player Action

» [redacted]
Rockstar Games

» **Developer**
Rockstar Games

» [redacted]
Fall 2017

We just got our first, brief glimpse of Rockstar's return to the wild west. The debut trailer opens with several idyllic environmental shots of the frontier, backed by a soft, violin and piano-driven score, ending with a shot of an armed posse on horseback charging across the plains toward snow-covered mountains. So what should we make of the early look at Red Dead Redemption 2? We performed a shot-by-shot analysis of the trailer to extract any intel we could possibly find. Read on to learn more.

Signs Point To A Late 1800s Setting

A few clues in the trailer helped us triangulate the timeframe in which Red Dead Redemption 2 takes place. In the shot of Worth's General Store, you can see an electric light lining the muddy street. The earliest use of electric street lighting in the United States was 1880. That is also the relative time period many oil fields started popping up in the heartland, which we see in another shot later in the trailer. The large buffalo herd implies that this may take place before the species nearly went extinct around the turn of the century, with a mere 300 bison in existence by 1900. These signs point to Red Dead Redemption 2 being set before the events of the original, which took place in 1911.

Rockstar Technology Takes Another Leap Forward

Grand Theft Auto V is still one of the most stunning open-world games you can buy, and Red Dead Redemption 2 looks to continue that legacy. Many of the gorgeous vistas from the American frontier on display almost look like cinematic stills from famed directors like Alejandro Inarritu *(The Revenant)* and Paul Thomas Anderson *(There Will Be Blood)*, from the sun piercing through the forest canopy to the burning oil fields. Perhaps the most impressive shot in the trailer is the campfire with an amazing skybox of the Milky Way galaxy above.

Get Ready For A Vibrant Wildlife Ecosystem

Throughout the trailer, we saw grazing deer, roaming buffalo, herded cattle, a fox-like animal attacking a rodent, soaring birds, and vultures picking away at a coyote carcass as a dog barks angrily in protest. The pervasive nature of the wildlife hints at a fleshed-out ecosystem where animals hunt and scavenge others independent of whatever else is going on in the open world. This may likely be a key component to Rockstar's promised "truly living world." This should play well into the hunting system, which was one of the many highlights from the last game

American Heartland Has Very Diverse Environments

The Red Dead Redemption 2 announcement teased "an epic tale of life in America's unforgiving heartland." Judging by the trailer, this heartland looks quite expansive. The settings we've already seen include dense forests, rolling prairies, meandering river valleys, lakes, snowy peaked mountains, the aforementioned oil fields, and dusty plateaus. This hints that the game could cover a wide swath of the American Midwest, stretching from the Rocky Mountains to the Mississippi river.

Increased Native American Involvement?

Native Americans played a minor role in Red Dead Redemption. Given the "American heartland" setting of the sequel, the lands that some of the most prolific tribes called home, there's a great chance they play a larger role in the experience this time around. One shot from the trailer shows a dreamcatcher in the foreground as two people paddle a canoe along the bank of a lake or large river. We feel there is a lot of potential in exploring that natural friction that occurred between the settlers and the natives, so here's hoping Rockstar integrates it into the narrative.

Changing Seasons

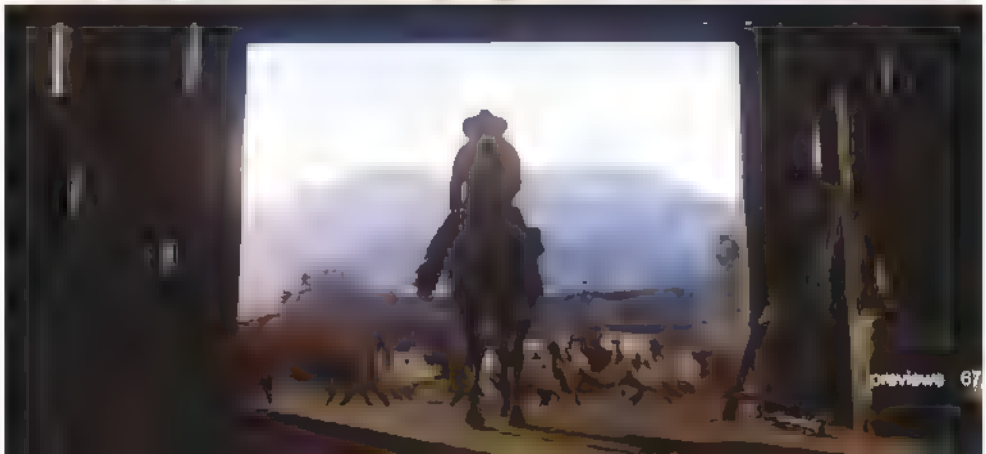
In the same scene we see the dreamcatcher and the canoe, we also catch a glimpse of a solitary leaf falling from a tree. Maybe a squirrel rustled it from the branch as it ran through the tree, but perhaps it signals that RDR 2's open world is dynamic enough to support the changing of the seasons. We would love to see how gameplay would be affected by dangerously low temperatures and deep snowbanks covering the plains and mountain passes.

Who Are The Outlaws?

By the end of the GTA V teaser trailer, we had a good feel for the background of at least one of the game's protagonists. No such luck with Read Dead Redemption 2. The trailer showcases several people riding alone in the countryside, returning to the farm from a hunt, visiting town, camping in the forest along a riverbank, mounting a horse at a cattle ranch, and one mysterious man with his back to the camera watching something burn. None appear to be repeat characters, leaving us to wonder which may be the next star. The trailer wraps with a shot of seven armed outlaws riding across the plains with their weapons drawn, surely a harbinger for future teases to come. Is this a posse that players control and/or recruit? Is it seven cooperative players in an experience that seamlessly blends the narrative and online elements of Rockstar open worlds? And is that a woman on the far right?

All of these questions must wait until Rockstar gives us our next look at what is surely the most anticipated game on the horizon from here forward.

» Matt Bertz



Final Fantasy XV

One last deep dive before launch

» Platforms
PlayStation 4
Xbox One

» Style
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» Publisher
Square Enix

» Developer
Square Enix

» Release
November 29

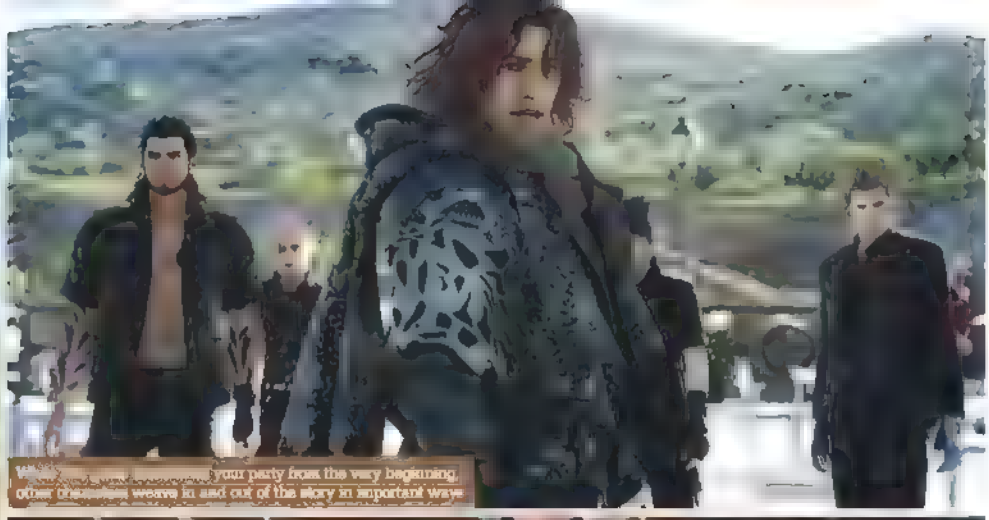
After so many years, it's hard to believe Final Fantasy XV is about to release. But after playing over a dozen of the opening hours of a near-final build, it's clear Square Enix is on track for final delivery. The game is ambitious and risky, challenging longtime franchise faithful to reevaluate expectations for its setting and gameplay. But that freshness and willingness to try new things is the most appealing to me, even as familiar flashes of nostalgia keep reminding me of the project's pedigree.

Final Fantasy XV wastes little time in communicating its most striking feature – a vast open world. After many hours of exploration, I'm blown away by the vast scope of the space you can explore, which is peppered with activities, collectibles, campsites, settlements, and breathtaking landscapes. Whether it's fishing off a dock or stopping in a diner for a game of the pinball-esque Justice Monsters Five, the constant opportunities for engagement and distraction is similar to what we've come to expect from games like Grand Theft Auto or Assassin's Creed.

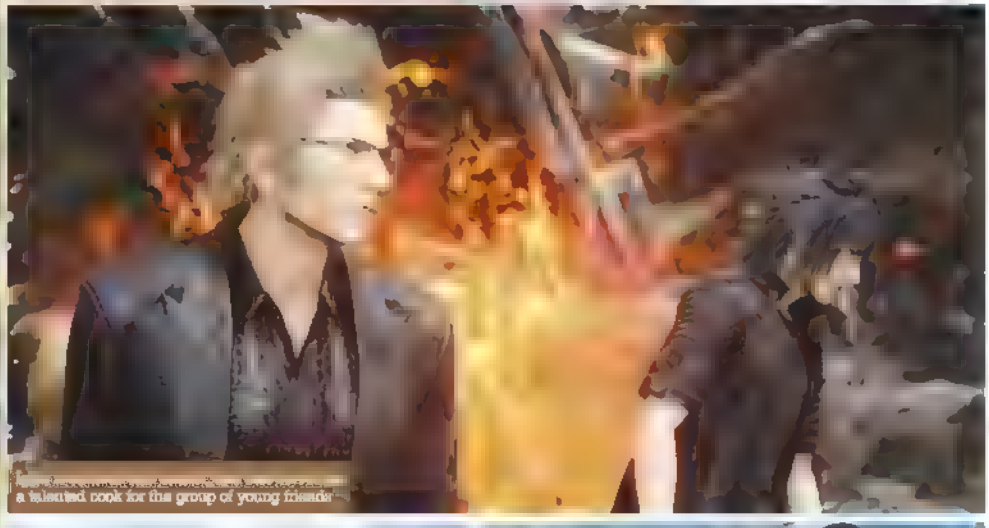
What begins as a carefree holiday-trip vibe rapidly takes a dramatic turn after the characters hear surprising news from back home, but even in the later chapters the story feels rooted in themes and tropes of male camaraderie and road-trip antics. Those ideas are reinforced by the day/night cycle, which demand you find campsites and roadside stops to refuel, eat, and commiserate around a fire with friends. One of your buddies takes pictures throughout each day, and I love the way those pictures chronicle the trip. With each new turn in the road, I became more enamored with the landscape, but the massive size of the world also means a lot of mostly passive travel, whether running down to a lake that's off the road, or a multi-minute highway drive to the next location in your cool Regalia car.

Combat is complex and challenging, but even after many hours I have mixed feelings. By and large, I enjoy the high speed and fluid animations that characterize the encounters, and I'm excited by the ability to teleport from place to place with such ease. However, the close quarters and high number of combatants often make for onscreen confusion, especially in tight indoor spaces. Understanding the distinctions between different weapons, taking best advantage of ally abilities, and even when to use magic are all mostly mysterious to me even after many hours, but that depth certainly won't be a bad thing if additional playtime reveals the layers of strategy.

The leveling system demands meaningful choices between combat upgrades for your lead, new abilities for your party members, and even bonuses for exploration and travel. Along with a broad selection of weapons and accessories, there is plenty of strategizing and optimizing to attempt. I'm still dubious of the magic system, which demands you craft individual-cast spells from limited available elements gathered in the field. While it's intriguing at first to experiment with different combinations, I worry that in later hours it may become tedious to constantly remake the same spells. It's a deep crafting system, and one for which I'm firmly withholding judgment until I'm many hours deeper



your party from the very beginning, other characters weave in and out of the story in important ways



a haunted look for this group of young friends

Riding chocobos along offroad areas is often the most efficient way to get around, and it's fun to see the party members interact with the birds

Encounters unfold across a landscape that is shockingly different from what most Final Fantasy fans have come to expect. With nods to Americana in abundance, the early hours feature gas stations, '50s-style diners, and literal Coleman tents pitched in the wilderness. The character leads wear clothes that wouldn't feel out of place hanging off the members of a modern emo band. But amid the anachronisms, visions of familiar Final Fantasy lore peek out. Hidden in the trees, a chocobo farm awaits your arrival. A mechanic named Cid fixes your car. Myths allude to ancient beings that can be summoned to aid the king in times of crisis. The deeper into the world I journey, the more the fantasy elements begin to assert themselves.

During my adventures, the interactions between the characters keep my attention, as does the depth of personal, political, military, and magical history inherent to the world. In more ways than one, you're dropping into the middle of a larger story as the game begins. Childhood crushes and long-valued friendships are already established, and the player is left to catch up on those dynamics. Even major catastrophic events take place offstage, like the collapse of a kingdom, leaving the player on the outside (unless you've been following along with the extended fiction). It's a daring storytelling approach that keeps the focus squarely on the main characters and their friendship even as the world shifts in inexplicable ways around them. If nothing else, it leaves me eager to see the rest of the game, and the ways in which the young prince and his entourage eventually face off against the conflict at hand.

Whether you immediately embrace the changes or not, there's one thing about Final Fantasy XV that can't be denied: This is a massive and profoundly complex game, both in terms of its systems and geography. Even when certain interactions left me confused or frustrated, I came away hungry to learn more. Fans will pass their own verdict on this dramatic reinvention of the long-running franchise in just a few short weeks. » **Matt Miller**

Diablo III: Reaper Of Souls

An anniversary event and new playable character coming soon

Platforms
PlayStation 4
Xbox One
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360
PC • Mac

» Style
1 to 4-Player Action

Publisher
Blizzard Entertainment

» Developer
Blizzard Entertainment

Release
2017

Diablo III continues to grow and evolve after the Reaper of Souls expansion. In January, a new anniversary event will bring the dungeons and denizens of the original Diablo to Diablo III. The Butcher, Skeleton King, Lazarus, and even the original giant red menace are joining the roster for an event that runs through the month and is scheduled to return each year with special rewards and areas to explore. While the dungeons aren't precise equivalents to their Diablo counterparts, expect to take a walk down nostalgia lane with special graphics and audio filters, classic monsters, and unforgettable zingers like "Ahh, fresh meat!" when the Butcher makes a beeline for your health.

Beyond the upcoming trip down memory lane is the arrival of one of Diablo II's favorite characters, the Necromancer. This full-fledged character class draws upon many of the classic Diablo II abilities like corpse explosion, blood golems, curses, and skeletal armies, but many of the abilities are being tweaked to work with Diablo III's style and sensibility. Instead of mindless automated armies, players can give their undead throngs orders to attack specific units, which is extremely handy for taking on rift bosses or other critical targets. The Necromancer is available as part of a paid character DLC pack that contains additional character slots and some stash space as well. The Necromancer's release comes with a smattering of new legendaries and sets appropriate for the class.

In addition to this exciting new content, upcoming console seasons starting with Season 10 will include many of the cool features PC players have enjoyed for some time, including the Season Journey, leaderboards, and season rewards and cosmetics.

» Daniel Tack

As shown here, the anniversary event includes special filters to capture that old-school feel

Overwatch

A grand stealth entrance

Overwatch is bringing a smattering of new and exciting things to the table, including a new character, maps, modes, and more ways to get loot. The longstanding Sombra mystery came to an end at BlizzCon 2016, where the stealth infiltrator was finally unveiled.

As a hit-and-run offensive assassin and disruptor, Sombra's thermoptic camo lets her sneak behind enemy lines, but it doesn't make her invulnerable and she can be knocked out of it with a stray shot or two. Sombra's stealth also has a bit of a delay before it begins, and any disruption to this will interrupt her stealthy activities. While powerful, Sombra's stealth capabilities are balanced and won't make her an invincible, invisible nightmare, and are best used in combination with her other skills.

Sombra packs a translocator device she uses for mobility, allowing her to get out of trouble fast or teleport behind enemy lines before setting up a stealth assault. When she's in range, Sombra can execute hacks on opposing players, dealing a serious blow to their damage and setting up you and your team for an easy kill. Sombra's submachine gun-style weapon doesn't pack great burst damage, but it does have a huge clip, so your hacks and stealth appearances can all have serious impact against both single targets and disrupted or distracted teams.

Hit up Antarctica for a more intimate experience designed for fewer players

Sombra's ultimate ability is a giant EMP that shuts down shields (Sorry, Reinhardt) and enemy powers, making it an excellent way to start a team fight off right by sneaking up and unleashing an attack that can leave the entire enemy team shut down and vulnerable.

Alongside the long-awaited character, Overwatch is rolling out several new maps. Oasis is a new control map set in the desert, and Ecopoint: Antarctica gives Overwatch a compact map that is ideal for 3v3 and 1v1 battles. The upcoming Overwatch Arcade facilitates new playstyles such as this with smaller team composition rulesets like 3v3, 1v1, no hero switching, mirror matches, mystery heroes, and more. These Arcade battle modes also add opportunities for players to pick up additional "first win" loot boxes for every new game mode as well as weekly rewards that let players pick up an additional three loot boxes each week.

With more content always on the way for Overwatch, these new features should do much to quell some of the initial concerns that the game lacked variety in terms of maps and game modes at launch. Expect to see plenty of sneaky Sombras coming up behind your team to deliver devastating destruction in the months to come.

» Daniel Tack

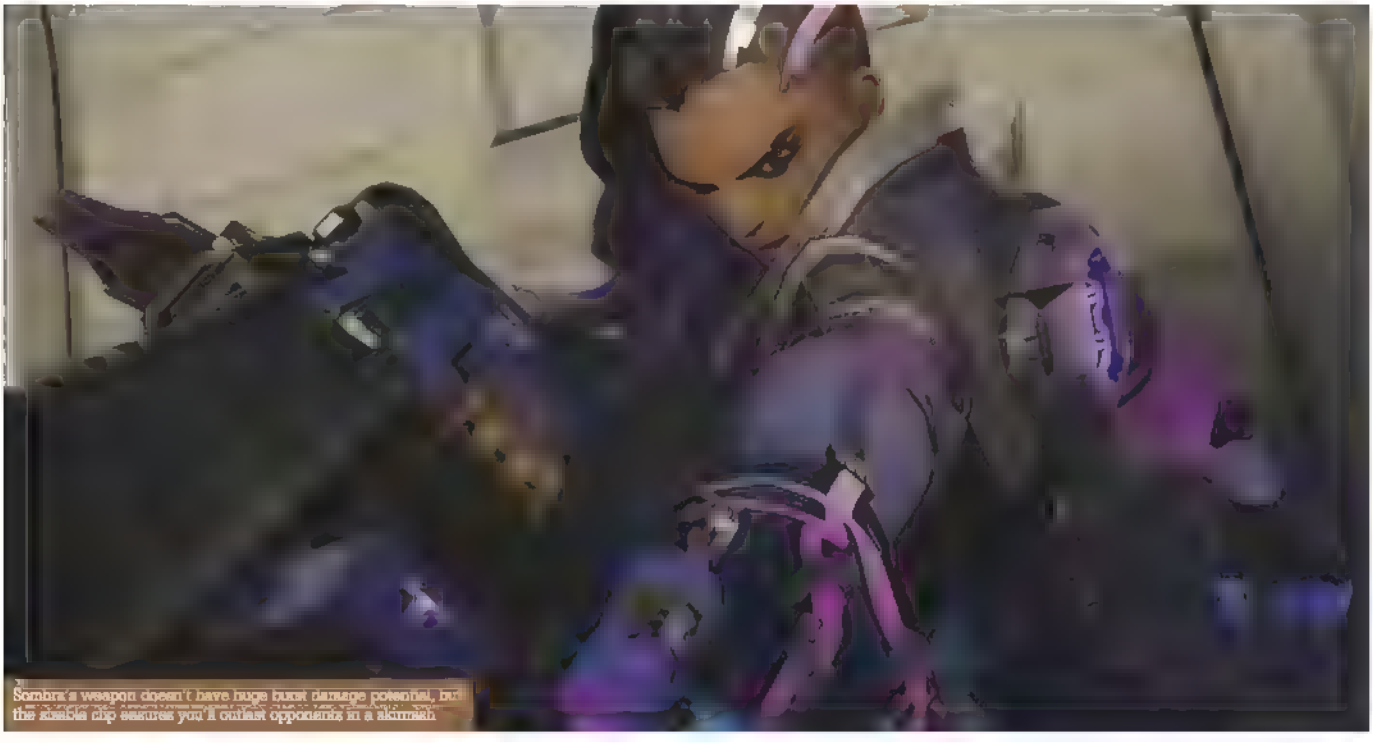
[redacted]
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
12-Player Online Shooter

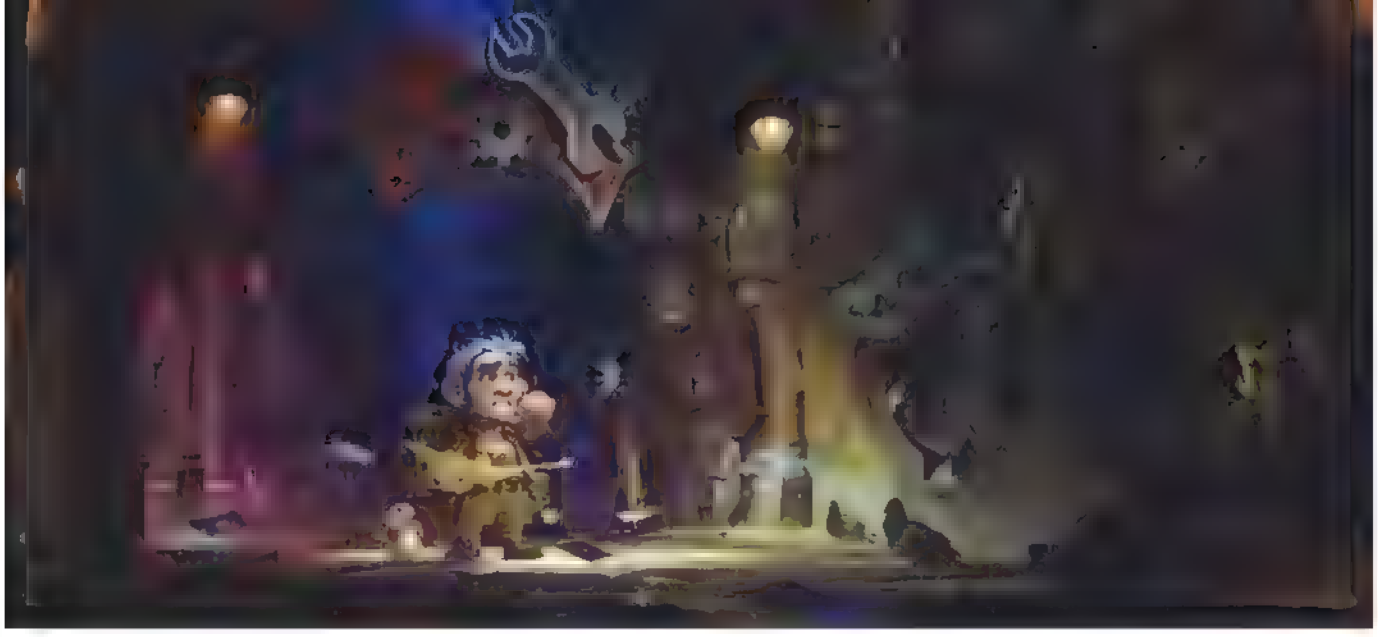
[redacted]
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Developer**
Blizzard Entertainment

[redacted]
November



Sombra's weapon doesn't have huge burst damage potential, but the sizable clip ensures you'll outlast opponents in a skirmish



Hearthstone: Mean Streets Of Gadgetzan

Cross-class chaos

» **Platforms**
PC • iOS • Android

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy (2-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Developer**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Release**
December

Announced at BlizzCon 2016, Hearthstone's next big expansion, Mean Streets of Gadgetzan, plans to shake up the game in interesting new ways. With 132 new cards, this expansion adds its own new characters to the mix instead of taking from the established canon, and it also introduces crime families that form the backbone of the seedy thieving action that makes up life in Gadgetzan. Mechanically, these crime families offer Hearthstone a whole new style of cards, which are lumped into a family instead of a class restriction, and can be played by three different classes each. So instead of having cards that only a Priest can use or only a Mage can use, these cards fall into tri-class buckets that allow for diverse strategies.

These tri-class strategies allow players to accent their decks with cards and combinations that play well outside the established rules of the game. For instance, the Warlock's ability to draw extra cards comes with a significant cost of life, but what if the Warlock had access to some of the Priest's healing spells and abilities? Cards like the Kabal Courier, Lotus Agent, and Grimestreet Informant can be played in any of their respective family decks, but also allow the player to discover cards from their allied family affiliations. This opens up a new angle that lets you reliably access cards that you can't play in your deck outright.

One of the most interesting cards coming with this expansion is Kazakus, the leader of the Kabal faction, who can be played by the "caster" family (i.e., Priests, Mages, and Warlocks). Kazakus lets players break all the rules by allowing them to create a custom spell when he enters play, tailored to the player's needs at the time of the game. Using the discovery system, Kazakus can create over 100 different spells to give players access to exactly the spell they might need to deal with the back-alley smugglers and criminals. Getting Kazakus' powerful ability to trigger comes at a price – you can't have any duplicates in your deck when he comes into play.

Along with the new strategies that come from class combos and family sharing, current deck archetypes get some new tools as well, like the Drakonid Operative for Priest dragon decks. This shady character lets you discover a card from your opponent's deck and use it as your own. Expect themes like thievery, stealing, and skulduggery to run throughout this expansion and offer takes on this theme to existing decks and playstyles.

» Daniel Tack

Meet The Family

The Kabal: Priests, Mages, and Warlocks have access to this group of outcast magic users. One of the set's coolest cards is Kazakus, who is also the leader of The Kabal.

Grimy Goons: Hunters, Warriors, and Paladins draw from this faction that focuses on brute strength and intimidation to get the job done.

Jade Lotus: Druids, Shamans, and Rogues get access to this secretive family focused on assassination and arcane secrets.

Outlast II

Terrifying, bloody, and disgusting

Similar to its predecessor, Outlast II casts you as an investigative journalist with a night vision-powered camera in hand, and no means to fight off foes. While the setup feels familiar, the terrors that lurk in the darkness are terrifyingly foreign.

At the beginning of the demo, I'm staring at a burning cross. Soon, despite a crippling injury, I wander into an eerie small town in the dead of night, but it's not as deserted as it first seems. Shadowy figures stare me down in distant bushes, and I find appalling scenes like a blood-soaked manger and a pit filled with hundreds of corpses.

However, Outlast II's biggest threats aren't necessarily human. A supernatural chill fills the air, and I'm dragged into a well headfirst by what looks like a giant tongue. I become disoriented, confused, and horrified. The inside of the well transforms into the air vents inside a school, and soon I'm walking down a hallway, looking over my shoulder to make sure I'm not followed.

But even with this extra caution, a ghoul with long hair, similar to the monster in *The Grudge*, jumps out at me without warning and I scream.

While Outlast II plays much like the original, Red Barrels notes that some changes are coming to the series, including a microphone mechanic.

"We want to give the player a new perspective with the microphone," says David Chateauneuf, co-founder and game designer at Red Barrels. "Like you can see in the demo, there are left and right [audio channels], so we're trying to give some tools to the player to know if his opponent is close or far."

This microphone addition gives players a better idea of the proximity of foes, and whether they should run and hide or continue forward. Chateauneuf also mentions the team is working on a segment that takes place on a lake, where players must swim through a dark body of water whilst fearing something below the waves could drag them down.

"We have a new environment at a lake, so you can expect to have some exotic gameplay there," Chateauneuf says.

Outlast II releases in 2017. » **Elise Favis**

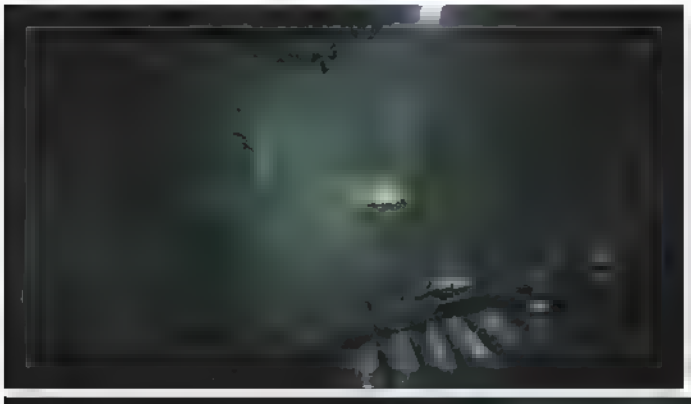
» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

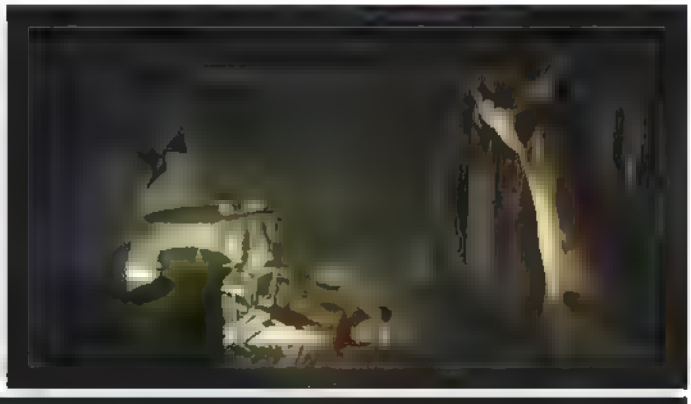
» [redacted]
1-Player Action/Adventure

» **Publisher**
Red Barrels

» **Developer**
Red Barrels

» [redacted]
2017





Heroes Of The Storm

Two legendary arrivals

» **Platforms**
PC • Mac

» **Style**
MOBA

» **Publisher**
Blizzard Entertainment

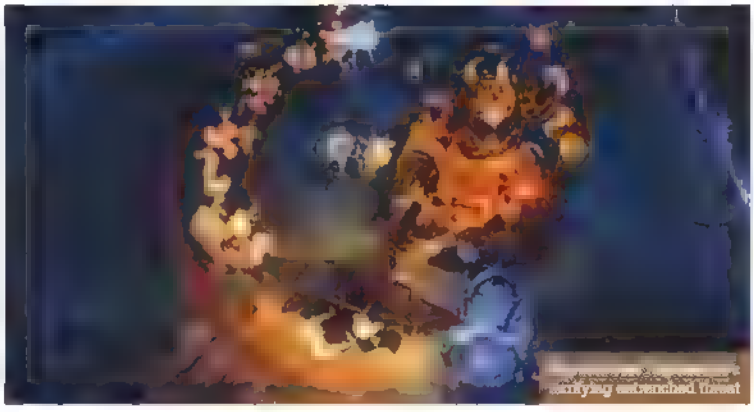
» **Developer**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Release**
TBA

Heroes of the Storm is getting not one but two of Warcraft's iconic figures soon, as shown off at BlizzCon 2016. Varian, who you may remember from his not-so-majestic death at the beginning of Leg on, comes to the battle as a hero who can be built out in several different ways, from a colossus-smashing warrior tank to an assass nation-oriented rogue. This gives players a way to actually craft a different character in each game played, allowing more response to enemy playstyles and strategies Varian's versatility in this regard makes for more diverse gameplay decisions and gives players more choices than simply going through the motions as they pick the same talents every game.

While Varian is a classic character, he falls in the shadow of the other character coming – literally. One of World of Warcraft's most legendary raid bosses, Ragnaros, will be bringing all of his fury to Heroes of the Storm. As with other creative characters that the HotS team has brought to the game, such as the two-player controlled Cho'gall or command-from-across-the-battlefield Abathur, Ragnaros has his actual raid presence come alive inside the game. Ragnaros can actually take over allied forts or destroyed forts with his Molten Core ability, becoming larger than life and gaining health and new powerful abilities. You'll feel like an actual raid boss, crushing enemies with Sulfuras, dropping meteors, and even letting loose a lava wave that travels down an entire lane, leveling anything in its path. In true raid fashion, players get a warning before the devastation comes to get out of the way, but everything in its path takes serious damage or is slain outright.

In addition to the two legends of Warcraft coming to the fray, a new Brawl (formerly known as Arena) called Blackheart's Revenge was showcased during BlizzCon 2016, where two teams try to defend and sink battleships, clashing over cannonballs and cannons. » Daniel Tack



Syberia III

Continuing Kate Walker's adventure

» **Platforms**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Adventure

» **Publisher**
Microids

» **Developer**
Koalabs

» **Release**
Spring

More than 12 years after the release of Syberia II, creator Benoît Sokal is reviving Kate Walker's strange tale with a third instalment. While this is a continuation of where Syberia II left off, fans can expect several differences this time around.

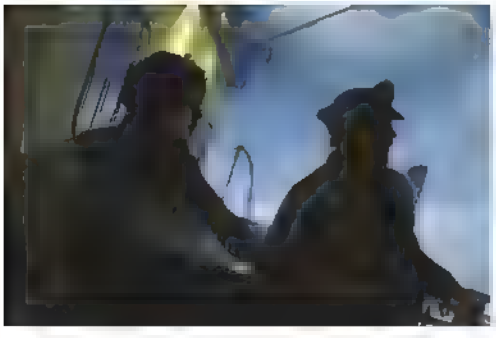
Past Syberia entries were point-and-click adventures, and while Syberia III still features similar mechanics, the sequel sports some clear Telltale-esque influences. Aesthetically pleasing 3D environments feature hotspots to hover over and interact with, and the choices you make affect the storyline.

Our demo begins with Kate waking up in a hospital bed alongside a patient with an amputated, bandaged leg. Speaking to him, you find out that he is the leader of a clan called the Youkol, which becomes a larger part of the story later on when Kate helps these nomads and their snow ostriches migrate.

For now, however, my first objective is to find a way to leave the hospital. Early in the game, the puzzles aren't terribly difficult. For example, one requires me to search the hospital room for a tool to open the call-button box, and then repair it by moving around some wires.

Stepping out into the health facility's main area, I speak with two older men enjoying a game of chess. They tell me that in order to escape the hospital, I must visit with the doctor and convince him that I'm healthy enough to leave. Once I meet the sinister doctor, he has me undergo a lie detector test by strapping me into a wooden chair. Depending on how I respond, my tendency to lie or tell the truth offers different outcomes. After this brief encounter, I retrieve a key needed to open the elevator that leads to the exit. Another small puzzle requires me to shift the key's strange, branch-like parts to align with its shadows.

From what I played of Syberia III, it looks to be a promising adventure that leans more towards a cinematic structure than the previous games; even though the demo contained several puzzles, much of my time was spent talking to wacky characters and choosing dialogue options. I look forward to revisiting it in full when it releases. » Elise Favis



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Robo Recall

Full metal carnage

» **Platform**
Rift

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter

» **Publisher**
Oculus

» **Developer**
Epic Games

» **Release**
2017

Unveiled at Oculus Connect 3, Robo Recall is Oculus and Epic Games' attempt to incentivize people to invest in the Oculus' Touch controllers. During my demo with the game, Robo Recall made a pretty strong case for the sort of fantastic experiences Oculus Touch VR can offer in the hands of the right developer.

Essentially a full game version of last year's Bullet Train demo, Robo Recall casts you as an agent tasked with terminating androids who have become faulty and unruly. Bad news: There is an entire army of unruly androids now, so you're going to be working overtime. The demo I played took place in the downtown district of an unnamed city and let me go toe-to-toe with a hundred or so robots.

Robo Recall's action is exciting because of how many options it offers you. You can shoot your enemies down as they come toward you if the classic gunslinger style of gunplay appeals to you. However, why settle for that when you can literally rip off a robot's head and chuck it at another opponent and kill them? You can rip their limbs from their bodies and use them as weapons. You can even deflect bullets back at the androids who fired them.

Movement, like many shooting games in VR, is done via teleportation instead of actual movement. To Robo Recall's credit, it doesn't feel like a hassle thanks to how quick and easy it is to look where you need to go and then just be there within the click of a button. I traveled along several street blocks, zipping to balconies and atop buses for tactical advantage, and rained down bullets on my foes. At one point one android leaped at me, I grabbed him by his torso, ripped off his arm and threw it at two spider-like robots, killing them.

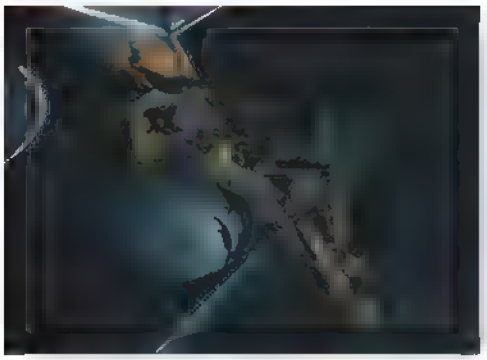
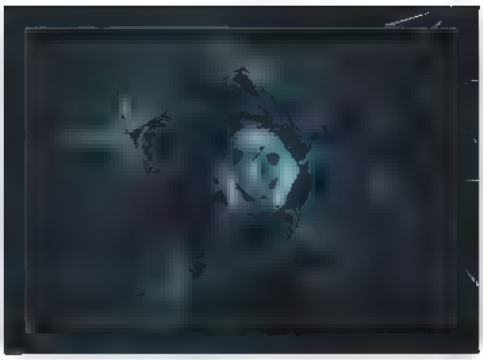
While Robo Recall still does not feel like the killer app virtual reality needs to take hold of its potential player base, in part because it basically feels like a very fancy version of Time Crisis, it's hard to deny how drawn in I was by the demo's violent delights. It is definitely one of the strongest titles Oculus has right now and might justify the steep ($200) price of the Touch controllers, which are required to play the game.

We'll have to wait until early 2017 to see if Robo Recall's novelty will last for its entire campaign, but as a VR skeptic it's one of the few games I'm excited to strap on the headset for again.

» **Javy Gwaltney**

Lone Echo

Making the jump

Ever wonder what a game version of the battle training simulator in *Ender's Game* might play like? Lone Echo's multiplayer mode, which pits teams of five against each other in a zero-gravity take on soccer, is probably the closest thing we have to that.

Your objective is simple: get the *Tron*-like disc into the enemy's goal. Both teams fly about in an arena filled with objects you can bounce off of to pursue the spinning disc. Movement is controlled by a thrust button, as well as you using your arms to push yourself off whatever you're next to. This is initially disorienting, but once you get used to movement, it's exciting to shoot off of a piece of rock to grab the disc as it zooms across space. Stunning enemies to steal the disc from them and latching onto (and launching off of) teammates are valid strategies you'll have to master if you want to emerge victorious.

At its best, Lone Echo is an exhilarating experience. It delivers the fantasy of zooming about in zero gravity without making me sick to my stomach. A few bugs and glitches interrupted matches a couple of times – including a humorous one that shot my arm out across the length of the arena. VR motion jankiness aside, Lone Echo is shaping up to be one of the most interesting enticements for investing in virtual reality.

The game, developed by the same studio that created The Order: 1886, also includes a story-driven adventure campaign. We're curious to see how Echo's unique movement mechanics translate in its single-player mode.

» **Javy Gwaltney**

» **Platform**
Rift

» **[redacted]**
1-Player Adventure (10-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Oculus

» **Developer**
Ready At Dawn

» **[redacted]**
20.7

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reviews

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

81 Titanfall 2

The original Titanfall launched to both praise and criticism, with one of the sticking points being the lack of a single-player mode. Titanfall 2 rectifies that with one of the best-paced campaigns in recent memory, while the tweaks to multiplayer make it more exhilarating than ever. Titanfall 2 is a step up from its predecessor, and an essential first-person shooter.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game fails short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Bringing a game console to a rooftop party/pick-up basketball game/go-kart race.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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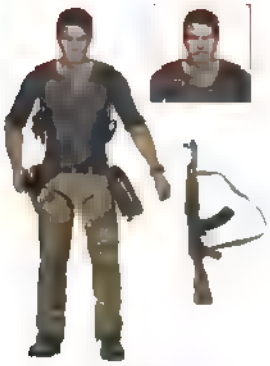

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Call Of Duty: Infinite Warfare

The heavy gravity of war

9

gamerinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Shooter (18-Player Online) **Publisher** Activision **Developer** Infinity Ward **Release** November 4 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Take the boots-on-the-ground combat of Call of Duty to outer space, complete with space skirmishing jet-style fighting, capital starships, and anti-gravity grenades

» Graphics
Enjoy plenty of eye candy as you explore Titan, Mars, and more out in the vastness of space

» Sound
The score appropriately rises and falls with the action alongside plenty of interesting banter between soldiers to take the edge off the constant explosions and gunfire

» Playability
The campaign is slightly more challenging than recent Call of Duty titles, but optional unlocks from side missions provide assistance. Multiplayer is easy to jump right into, and the Zombies mode is much more accessible than the hardcore version in Call of Duty: Black Ops 3

» Bottom Line
Infinite Warfare provides a potent triple-threat of entertainment. A hard-hitting campaign that deals with the sacrifices of war, a multiplayer mode overflowing with customization, and a nostalgia-laden trip through the '80s with the Zombies mode

» Replay Value
High

Campaigns in the Call of Duty series can often be distilled down to a series of setpieces, clichéd villains, telegraphed twists, and ridiculous monologues punctuated with excessive explosions. In Infinite Warfare, you still get all that, but if you're not careful you might also find yourself shedding a solitary tear for the brave soldiers and their sacrifices in the brutal war against the Settlement Defense Front. While the characters are cut right from archetypal cloth, real empathetic weight seeps through the story from beginning to end. Nothing is lost in terms of gunplay or the big moments, either; you still have a diverse roster of weapons to choose from, and the shooting is on-point.

Surprisingly, *Game of Thrones'* Kit Harington as a critical commander of the enemy forces is the one notable misstep in the cast, as he fails to create tension or animosity as an antagonistic presence. Other characters, like the robot-soldier Ethan, are surprising in a good way. Too often the wisecracking sidekick trope is the stuff of nightmares, but he's handled masterfully and ends up stealing every scene he's in.

Along with the solid boots-on-the-ground combat the franchise is known for, Infinite Warfare features flight missions in your jet-like Jackal that task you with shooting down other fighters, taking out enemy starships with cannons, and placing flares at the right moment to avoid enemy missiles. This isn't some tacked-on gimmick just to add a wrinkle to the established conventions; I enjoyed many intense moments dodging debris while attempting to get a lock on enemy ace pilots. You also venture into the void of space without your ship during several segments, providing a taste of zero-gravity combat to go with the rest of the in-space meal. While the zero-gravity combat is less compelling than the rush of adrenaline the Jackal fights provide, it doesn't feel forced or out of place.

Weaponry feels rooted in realism, despite adding energy weapons and other elaborate future design tech to the mix. The weapon tech is somewhat dialed back from the flashy laser beams and other futuristic fare found in other recent Call of Duty titles. The mobility suite mirrors Call of Duty: Black Ops 3, offering boosted jumps, slides, and wall-running. These elements are again more of an accent than essential. Mobility hearkens back to much older games in the franchise, with these elements mainly providing some alternate traversal options on maps. As I vastly prefer a slower experience to the frenetic pacing of Advanced Warfare, the pace of combat here suits me quite well.

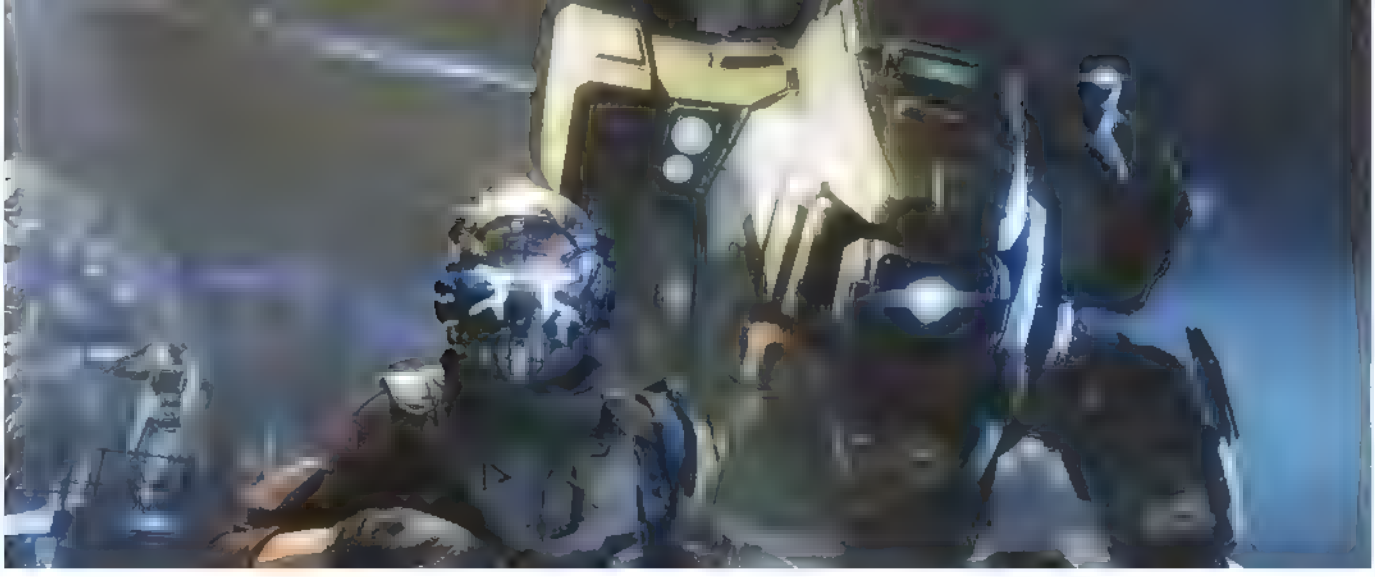
Multiplayer offers massive customization. You can create standard kits right off the bat, including stuff built for newer players that have trouble keeping a scorestreak going. I am pleased with the weapon and class options for new or lapsed players to get in the mix and not feel like they're dragging their team down, while still letting more experienced players shine without devolving into a chaotic shootfest.

All of the expected multiplayer modes are available, from traditional team deathmatch, hardpoint, and kill confirmed to more exotic offerings like infected, gun game, or defender, where players attempt to hold a ball in a lethal game of keepaway. Tired of getting shot in the back after you spawn? Try Frontline, which has fixed spawn locations. Whatever your playstyle, there's a mode for you, and we're almost at the point where there may be too many game modes if Activision keeps expanding. Infinite Warfare might be at the perfect temperature in terms of options.

The Zombies mode takes many of the same features of the film-noir undead romp of Black Ops 3, tones down the difficulty, and offers players more substantial upgrades to take from game to game. The journey now takes place in an amusement park and is infused with '80s music, characters, and secrets. David Hasselhoff as the mysterious DJ, killer exploding clowns, and tracks from bands like R.E.M. and Blondie make this mode feel like a unique experience despite implementing many of the mechanics from Black Ops 3. Zombies is a fun, nostalgia-laden co-op experience that's accessible without needing a hardcore team to make steady progress.

Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare features a compelling single-player experience with plenty of optional missions for those looking for more, and robust multiplayer modes for players of every style, whether you're leading the scoreboards in kill confirmed or goofing around with friends taking on an alien invader in an over-the-top amusement park.

» Daniel Tack



Titanfall 2

Striking a fine balance

gamesfarmer GOLD gamesfarmer GAME OF THE MONTH

Style 1-Player Shooter (16-Player Online) **Publisher** Electronic Arts
Developer Respawn Entertainment **Release** November 28 **Rating** M

9.5

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

When the first Titanfall was released, it garnered praise for pitting players against each other in the future as wall-running, submachine gun-toting pilots capable of calling down and controlling massive mechanized death machines However, the game also received a good deal of criticism for lacking a single-player component. The sequel seeks to satisfy those in search of a more story-driven singular experience and succeeds.

Titanfall's universe is simple: An evil empire is trying to rule the galaxy and a rebellion is fighting them, with both sides duking it out on various planets. Certain specialists in both armies, simply referred to as "pilots," are capable of operating mechs called Titans. In the campaign, you play as rebel Rifleman Cooper, who's training to become a pilot when his regiment gets stranded on a mysterious, lush planet. You wake up to find your mentor dying after he saves your life. He gives you control of his Titan, B.T., and charges you with finishing a secret mission.

The campaign has a narrow mission structure similar to Call of Duty, where you're constantly being funneled from location to location and accomplishing objectives. However, nearly all of the sections where you're fighting enemies are open, giving you a bevy of tactical options to complete your goals. I enjoyed the flexibility of the campaign, which provides opportunities for many playstyles. For example, sneaking past camps and scampering away from fights without firing a single shot was extremely satisfying on my second playthrough, as was raining down bullets on foes as I ran across walls high above them. A few fun sections focus on piloting B.T. to take on other enemy Titans in battles, which play like an interesting combination of MechWarrior and Star Fox.

Titanfall 2 also features levels that are more puzzle-like in nature than shooter-focused. I don't want to go into spoiler territory, because these sequences are best experienced fresh. However, I found my expectations constantly turned on their head the deeper I dug into the campaign, all the way until the end.

While the fantastic quality of the single-player campaign is the true gem of Titanfall 2, Respawn wisely didn't mess with the multiplayer formula too much.

New additions include more tactical abilities that players can use to gain an advantage on the battlefield. The grappling hook is particularly satisfying if you manage to hook an enemy player because then you zoom toward them to deliver a fatal roundhouse kick that sends their corpse soaring into the sky. Titanfall 2 also adds a host of new Titan classes for players to use that each come with their own specialized loadouts. Scorcher, for example, lobs giant fire bombs that spew flames everywhere, while the Ion Titan uses beams to snipe enemies from afar and set traps. These classes add a bit of tactical leeway in Titan battles that weren't there in the original game.

Titanfall 2's multiplayer continues to be generous toward players of all play styles. Don't want to go head to head with other pilots? In Attrition and the new Bounty Hunt mode, you can raise your team score by wiping out A.I. units wandering the map. This might sound like a small thing, but matches often come down to the wire, with single-digit numbers being the difference between victory and defeat. You can also peek out from behind windows in apartments to take shots at enemy titans to help your fellow players out. At its best, Titanfall works as a tight multiplayer experience that's great at getting players to work together even if they're inclined to be lone wolves, and that continues to be the case in Titanfall 2.

The progression system from the first game is more or less still here, but with a plethora of gun attachments and camos, bought with merit points earned in matches. The progression system still ends with a cap where you can choose to "regenerate" and start all over again. Doing this gives you access to new cosmetic gear, but it still feels progress on is lacking something of substance to keep people playing after they hit the cap.

In an era where it feels like the majority of shooters either have single-player or multiplayer tacked on, Titanfall 2 is the full package. The top-tier campaign has nearly perfect pacing, and the subtle revisions and additions to the multiplayer make it better than ever. For first-person shooter fans, Titanfall 2 is a must play.

» Javy Gwaltney

» **Concept**
Fight across grand sci-fi battlefields as swift soldiers capable of calling down giant mechs to do their bidding

» **Graphics**
Environments and robot designs are spectacular, but human character models look out of place

» **Sound**
Characters who should be flimsy caricatures are brought to life by great voice acting, and a phenomenal score bolsters the action

» **Playability**
Like its predecessor, Titanfall 2 plays like a simple and straightforward first-person shooter whether you're zipping around with a submachine gun or bearing down on your opponents in your titan

» **Recommended?**
Titanfall 2 is that rare game where both its single-player and multiplayer modes are exceptional and highly entertaining in their own ways

» **Replay Value**
High

Battlefield 1

Large-scale warfare at its finest

9.25

gamerinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Shooter (64-Player Online) **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** DICE **Release** October 21 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Tap the unexplored territory of the first World War and infuse it with Battlefield's sensibilities

» Graphics
From the fog-covered trenches to the sun-drenched deserts, this is one of the most picturesque games available today

» Sound
DICE has always excelled at surrounding players with the cacophonous sounds of battle, and BF 1 is no different. However, the proximity sound of encroaching enemies is curiously (and frustratingly) absent

» Playability
Fluid controls guide the shooting, tank-driving, and plane-piloting experiences

» Entertainment
The World War I setting is a refreshing change of pace to the space shooters currently dominating the landscape

» Replay Value
High

When the opposition pushes all of its war assets toward one beachhead, sometimes it's smarter to avoid that fight altogether and make headway by creating another front. While Call of Duty, Titanfall, Halo, Destiny, Gears of War, and many other shooters compete in a sci-fi battle royale, DICE instead dove deeper into the annals of military history to reveal a singular first-person shooter gem: Battlefield 1.

The World War I setting feels refreshingly different than the modern sensibilities of contemporary Battlefield games. Biplanes, rudimentary tanks, and cavalry replace the jets, attack choppers, and missile guidance systems that ruined death on combatants in recent entries. Most guns have a much shorter range than modern precision rifles, and in general the combat is more brutish. With a startling array of gory melee kills, this may be the most bloody Battlefield game to date. In between mortar blasts and gunfire, the battlefield rings out with the tortured screams of soldiers being burned alive by incendiary grenades and flamethrowers, the violent coughs of those hit with mustard gas, and the savage battle cries of infantry charging toward enemies with their bayonets. These serve as constant reminders of the vicious nature of a war fought by more than 70 million people across the globe.

The most welcome change to the Battlefield combat is the return of destructibility; buildings haven't crumbled this remarkably since Bad Company 2. Tank shells turn wooden homes to splinters, decimate concrete windmills, and rip apart everything in between, leaving the maps in ruins after the dust settles. Weather plays a serious role in forcing tactical flexibility as well. When dense fog or intense sandstorms set in, sniping and lobbing tank shells from afar lose their value and you must venture closer to the objectives to turn the tides of battle. When a team falls far enough behind, they receive reinforcements in the form of the behemoth vehicles – a zeppelin, armored train, or battleship. In my experience these heavily armed juggernauts didn't always help the losing team gain the upper hand, but they definitely cut the gap thanks to their forceful artillery barrages and use as a new spawn point that can place players much closer to their objective.

All of these qualities are on display in the stellar new Operations mode, which acts like a hybrid of the popular conquest and rush modes. Assaulting teams must capture two flags at the same time to advance the frontline, and if they are repelled they are granted access to a behemoth the next round. When attackers capture the flags, the infantry belt spine-tingling screams as they charge toward the next objectives. These cinematic moments and the tense battles that can break out around capturing a solitary point create some of the most memorable experiences in the game.

Battlefield is at its best when large numbers of infantry vie for control with support from the various vehicles, which is why Operations and conquest are the best modes of the bunch. Rush used to belong to that class, but with a scaled-back number of players and less access to vehicles, this rendition feels lost in a no man's land between Battlefield's truest modes and the less interesting infantry-based team deathmatch, domination, and war pidgeons mode. These modes diminish the importance of the squad structure at the heart of Battlefield and play too much like every other shooter out there.

It wouldn't be a Battlefield launch without some quality-of-life issues, and Battlefield 1 has its share of minor but niggling annoyances. DICE inexplicably left out the ability to customize your loadouts from the main menu or between rounds, forcing you to waste valuable time you should be spending capturing flags while you peruse unlockable options. The developers also haven't found a solution for preventing enemy squad spawns from happening directly in front you; nothing is more annoying than training your sights on one enemy only to have three more beam in Star Trek-style out of nowhere. This legacy issue always shatters immersion. I also encountered four or five hard crashes and some extreme server lag when control points were overwhelmed with infantry and vehicles.

One perennial problem DICE solved with Battlefield 1 is the quality of its campaign. Since Bad Company 2, the studio has struggled to inject the best qualities of the franchise into a narrative sequence. Battlefield 1 succeeds in breaking the campaign into six cinematic short stories that explore different experiences from the Great War. The tone of these shifts from somber vignettes that speak to the magnitude of the tragedy to more lighthearted affairs focused on daring heroics. I wish these chapters told real stories of a war so many know so little about, but in execution they are still much more enjoyable than the last few campaigns and do a great job of introducing players to the Battlefield basics that carry over into multiplayer.

In an era dominated by modern and sci-fi shooters, Battlefield 1 going back to the Great War is a refreshing change of pace. After 40-plus hours with the riveting multiplayer action, I'm still eager to charge once more into the breach. • Matt Bertz

Mafia III

An offer you can refuse

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** 2K Games **Developer** Hangar 13 **Release** October 11 **Rating** M

6.75

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Mafia III is a fascinating period-piece game set in 1968, a year often cited as one of the most turbulent times in American history. The Vietnam War, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, the civil-rights movement, the women's-rights movement, rioting in more than 100 cities – many of these historical moments shape Mafia III's world, even though it takes place in a fictional version of New Orleans called New Bordeaux. Developer Hangar 13 doesn't shy away from the controversial content, and instead shines a spotlight on it, giving gamers an intimate look at an unstable Deep South, where racism and a tense feeling of hatred are ever present.

There is no tactful way to handle racism – it's always ugly – and it's ugly in this game as well. Hangar 13 wants players to feel the full effect of it, and that message is delivered loud and clear in Mafia III, seen from the eyes of Lincoln Clay, a biracial character who we meet moments after he returns from the Vietnam War. Although Clay served his country, he isn't seen as a hero or a person deserving respect. He is instead viewed suspiciously; women clutch their purses around him and tell him to walk on the other side of the street. He's also called the n-word repeatedly. Finding yourself standing in a world that has an institutional bias against you is uncomfortable, and I think Hangar 13 does an admirable job of trying to make players think about these issues. They are constants for the 30-plus hours it takes to complete the game. However, what begins as a unique and powerful backdrop for a game quickly becomes a typical revenge story that could unfold anywhere with anyone standing in as the protagonist.

The first two hours of Mafia III are special – a linear narrative with teeth destined to tackle the issues of the day head-on. The events are told through alternating time periods, one following Clay's exploits, another set years later through the lens of a faux-documentary told from the perspectives of people who witnessed the events firsthand.

The trouble for Clay begins when he agrees to help the Italian Mob rob a bank. The elaborate operation is cool to be a part of and pays off handsomely in the end. The Italians get a huge cut, and Clay gets enough to take care of him and his family. It's a moment to celebrate – a beautiful sequence – that ends in disaster. The Italians had no intention of giving Clay anything; he was viewed as a disposable part of this job. Clay, his surrogate father, and everyone he loved are mowed down. Clay takes a bullet to the head, but somehow survives. From the moment he awakens, he wants nothing but revenge. It's a powerful moment, but ends up dominating the remainder of the story. He becomes a faceless drone focused solely on bloodshed.

Clay wants to make the head of the Italian Mob, Sal Marcano, feel a great sense of loss. To accomplish this feat, he needs to take down Marcano's operations piece by piece. This is where Mafia III falls apart, and not just narratively. Players are subjected to an open-world gameplay design that favors repetition above anything else. The world itself is vividly realized, and fun to soak in – whether it's the gator-infested swamps, or streets filled with drunkards during a Mardi Gras celebration – but there isn't much to do other than approach a racket (usually consisting of a handful of enemies and something to destroy) and take care of business. The rackets range from drug trafficking and money laundering to, well, the Klan auctioning off people of color. No matter what racket you gun for, they all play out the same way – kill everyone. These rackets fall quickly, but to reach the boss at the top of their respective food chain, you need to whittle away at their operations, and that process grows duller as the game unfolds.

These actions legitimately feel like work at times, and there's the off-chance that two consecutive racket missions may take place in the same location, with the same enemy formations. Clay's approach to these situations is crude and simple: sneak in, knife or knock out as many people as possible (through solid stealth controls), and bring out the guns should they see you. Despite the targeting reticle being the size of a beach ball (making headshots dubious at times), the gunplay is fun and intense. The thrills, which could have been large, are sapped by the repetition of scenario designs.

The open world is mostly wasted, and the game is at its best when in the linear story missions. Mafia III is a missed opportunity to explore an important time in American history, and ends up being one of the most lifeless and one-note open-world experiences I've come across. You can see the potential for a great game here, but it sticks to simple gameplay and storytelling conventions, and ends up being a bloody bore.

» Andrew Reiner

» Concept
An open world that truly embraces the word "open," giving players little to do other than repetitive busywork and traveling to mission locations

» Graphics
The world is beautifully designed, giving players plenty to marvel at, but little to interact with. Even with different set dressing, most mission locations all start to look the same

» Sound
The period-specific radio stations are a delight to listen to. In addition to the great music, the DJs provide interesting insight into the time and events of the game. Character dialogue is also strong

» Playability
Part stealth, part shooter, Mafia III rarely wavers from giving the most basic sense of both of these actions

» Entertainment
It roars out of the gate and looks to tackle difficult subject matter in a meaningful way, but quickly devolves into a mindless revenge story

» Replay Value
Moderately high

WWE 2K17

Wrestling with the basics

5.75

PS4 • Xbox One • PC
PS3 • 360

Style 1 to 6-Player Fighting (6-Player Online) **Publisher** 2K Sports **Developer** Visual Concepts/Yuke's **Release** October 11 **Rating** T

» **Concept**
Pare down a bloated feature set to focus on improving a basic gameplay system that features the flashiest wrestlers in the world

» **Graphics**
The WWE games have made massive leaps in the last few years, but a few wrestlers still look like cartoons next to their digitally scanned brethren

» **Sound**
Michael Cole, JBL, and the rest of the gang's commentary feels more natural than ever before, but if you close your eyes you're not going to mistake this for a WWE pay-per-view

» **Playability**
Several tweaks to the fighting engine move combat in the right direction, but most fights devolve into battles of attrition

» **Entertainment**
Showcase mode is sorely missed, and while the overall action is more polished, WWE 2K still has some ways to go before it gets where it needs to be

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

For most annualized franchises, 12 months is barely enough time to add new features that will entice fans to return to the series year after year. With WWE 2K17, however, developer Yuke's decided to subtract instead of add. Rather than bolster a bloated feature set, WWE 2K17 ditches the popular Showcase mode in favor of polishing existing systems. But while the core combat has improved over last year's entry, Yuke's grappling skills still aren't strong enough to make anyone other than hardcore WWE fans take notice.

Most of WWE 2K17's combat improvements are incremental. Wrestlers still dish out the same basic attack combos, still have the same stamina management system, and still use the same pin/kickout mechanics. However, reversals now feature a larger timing window, which makes it easier to take control of a match. Taunts give you mid-match buffs that are a great way to catch your breath while your opponent is down. You can also perform post-match run-ins to interrupt a wrestler's victory celebration, which is great for fueling new rivalries. And for the first time in years, you can take the action into the crowd and into backstage areas. I loved throwing my opponent through AV trunks and finding other interactive objects to smash over their head. None of the tweaks to 2K17's action are game-changing, but they're all welcome.

Unfortunately, 2K17's incremental improvements only help expose the greater flaws in Yuke's wrestling series. The in-ring action is as sluggish and plodding as ever. These WWE superstars move like rigid action figures, which tends to drain most of the tension from each match. While 2K17's reversal windows are widened, the reversal cues are still disconnected from character animations, so the only thing clueing you into a reversal opportunity is a button prompt that appears over your wrestler's head.

Many matches feel like drudgery as your opponents almost always kick out of your first pin. You often have to build up and use your finishing move at least once or twice before getting a three count. Conversely, if you're really bad at WWE's timed button minigames, your opponent could count you out even when your character's health is in the green. Even when you're completely overpowering your opponents, 2K17's action feels like a battle of attrition rather than the exuberant display of athletic prowess that fans have come to love about WWE.

It's a shame WWE 2K17's core mechanics are such a grind, because most of the content surrounding the in-ring action is sure to please wrestling fans. The creation suite – which lets you customize your own wrestlers, championships, and arenas, among other things – is as deep as ever. MyCareer mode simulates your created wrestler's journey from the performance center through NXT and a string of championship belts to the WWE Hall of Fame. This experience is repetitive, but it is so deep that it allows you to create your own promos and manage your merchandise sales.

Meanwhile, the WWE Universe mode is basically a manager mode that lets you organize WWE shows, plant rivalries, and build championship dynasties. You can even see how you stack up against other players online in a variety of exhibition matches, and I experienced almost no lag while duking it out with real opponents. All of these modes are meaty, but the Showcase mode, which let you relive some of yesteryear's most glorious smack downs, was always the most polished and presentation-heavy mode. Its absence is sorely felt.

After previous publisher THQ folded and 2K took over this series with WWE 2K14, I had hoped the WWE games would see a slow crawl out of mediocrity, and that wrestling fans would eventually have a wrestling game they could be proud to show non-wrestling fans. Unfortunately, the 2K series has carried forward with the same by-the-numbers combat we've seen for years. 2K's next WWE game doesn't need to check off a list of incremental improvements – it needs a complete overhaul. » **Ben Reeves**

Skylanders Imaginators

Leaving the toys behind

Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** Activision **Developer** Toys for Bob **Release** October 16 **Rating** E10+

7

PS4 • Xbox One
Wii U • PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
A toys-to-life experience that is at its best when the toys are not used

» **Graphics**
Players have plenty of customization options to dive into for character creation. These Skylanders look just as colorful and creative as Toys for Bob's designs, even when the least likely of parts are mashed together

» **Sound**
Hearing from the Skylanders is a nice addition, but their dialogue isn't great. Also brace the kids for Trigger Happy's voice, which sounds like a demonic Elmo

» **Playability**
Levels are not as engaging, but the combat sequences always deliver heated encounters and a need to vary up techniques

» **Entertainment**
A strange deviation from the traditional, action-figured based formula that succeeds in rewarding players, but comes up short in story, levels, and collectibility

» **Replay Value**
High

In the film *Toy Story 3*, we watched Andy grow into an adult and leave his toys behind. Skylanders Imaginators has apparently matured to that age, as the toys have been pushed to the side to make room for character creation. That's right, this toys-to-life game is at its best when the action figures are left in the box, and players are using their imaginations to design their own warriors. This is a strange move on developer Toys for Bob's part, but the payoff is two-fold; equally in empowering the player with ownership over their characters, and making the gameplay more rewarding through the addition of loot.

Since this is a Skylanders game, the character-creation tools are linked to a physical product called the Creation Crystal. By placing this item on the Portal of Power, players can tweak just about every aspect of their monster, including appearance, gear, catch phrase, and more. The tools are easy to use, and the characters look just as colorful as any of Toys for Bob's designs.

Skylanders' purchasable goods have always been fair in design, but the Creation Crystal teeters on the edge of questionable practices. When a Crystal boots up, the first thing players must do is select the class of character. The classes, of which there are 10, make a huge difference in how the game is played. An archer or bazooka type are radically different than the knight or brawler, but there's no grace period for experimenting; once you select a class, your decision is final and you cannot change it – you'll need to buy another Crystal to try again. I wasn't happy with the first Skylander I made, and ended up shelving that figure to try another, an attempt that required another $10 Creation Crystal.

If you do happen to design a character you are happy with, you can alter its appearance as much as you want, and you'll end up doing this more than you think, thanks to the game showering you with loot. You'll get it for everything; defeating waves of enemies, completing minigames, taking down bosses, finding secret areas – it's a wonderful thing. Most of the loot is random, contained in chests and organized into rarity levels. Much like a Diablo game, it feels great to add a legendary weapon or armor piece to your avatar.

A warning to parents: Skylanders Imaginators supports in-game microtransactions for loot, and their placement is overly aggressive, but players likely won't have to buy anything unless they want full collections. I never once felt the need to purchase anything; I instead found myself overwhelmed by the number of chests that would accumulate through gameplay.

If you don't unleash your creative talents, Skylanders Imaginators can be played just like any other Skylanders game. All of the action figures from previous games are still compatible, and you can also purchase new Sensei characters – the most powerful Skylanders yet. The Senseis are large-scale figures (much like the Giants or Trap Masters) that can unlock unique zones and unleash a unique special attack. The push to buy more Sensei figures is again more aggressive than usual. Each time a new Sensei is added to the game, the level cap for all Sensei characters goes up by one. That's a powerful motivator, but don't think for a second that you need it. Level 20 (the default cap) is more than enough to complete the game on normal.

As creative as the themes are for the level designs, many are bogged down with simplistic box-pushing puzzles and uneventful stretches. A stage themed as an arcade mostly serves as a way for players to spend time with the game's multitude of lackluster minigames and diversions. Overworld navigation is often more interesting than any stage, thanks to a dramatic increase in the Skylanders' movement speed, and this area opening up to offer more secrets, secondary objectives, and the addition of encounters.

Combat is once again where Skylanders shines brightest, and it's great in Imaginators. Toys for Bob throws caution to the wind with most encounters, often overwhelming players with powerful waves of foes, or powerful bosses that you have to chip away at.

As much as I enjoyed playing as my own created character, the collector in me felt like something was missing. Part of what makes Skylanders great is the action figure element. A tube containing a glowing rock isn't nearly as cool as a beautifully sculpted monster. Even with players receiving a wealth of rewards, Skylanders Imaginators feels somewhat uninspired. Giving players creative control isn't enough of a spark to make this experience shine. » **Andrew Reiner**

Batman: Arkham VR

Become the detective

7.5

PSVR

» Concept
Don the mask of Batman and see the horrors of Gotham through his eyes

» Graphics
Every bit as detailed and gorgeous as Rocksteady's core Arkham games. The sense of immersion brings players closer to its twisted villains than ever

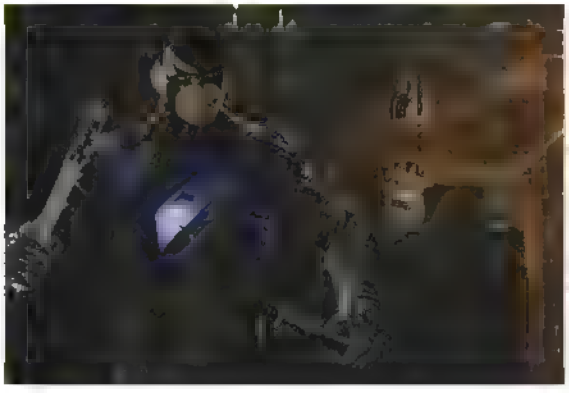
» Sound
Excellent dialogue and voice work flesh out another fun Arkham story

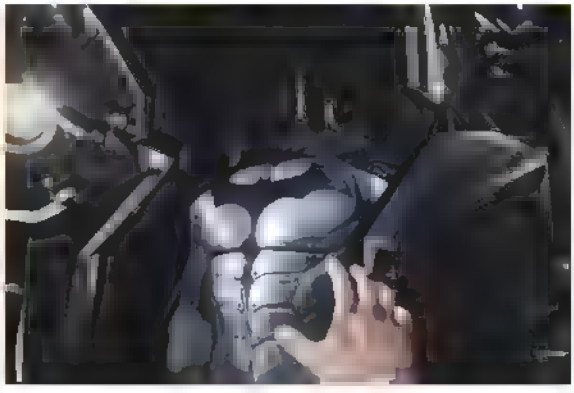
» Playability
Batman can't move his feet and he never raises a fist against anyone. Instead, the experience focuses on his detective skills and gadgets through fun environment puzzles and story sequences

» Entertainment
Even without character movement, Rocksteady shows us that Batman in VR can be an empowering experience. More, please!

» Replay Value
Moderate

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Warner Bros. Interactive **Developer** Rocksteady Studios **Release** October 13 **Rating** M





What would a Batman game be like if his feet were glued to the floor? That may sound like one of the worst decisions a developer could ever make, but Rocksteady Studios turns this improbable scenario into an engaging experience in Batman: Arkham VR, a short narrative-driven game designed exclusively for PlayStation VR.

Batman stands stationary throughout most of this adventure, but his detective skills and wonderful array of gadgets are put to good use. Rocksteady's other Arkham games give us a more complete look at Batman's multifaceted capabilities (skilled combatant, acrobatic city navigator, etc), but this VR experience does one thing better: it brings you directly into his suit, and I can't stress just how cool it is to see Gotham through his eyes.

When you put on the VR headset, you can't help but think you are donning the pointy ears and mask. Rocksteady hammers this sensation home numerous times – most notably with mirrors that show your transformation into the Caped Crusader. Having Batman stare back at you and mimic your subtlest movements in a mirror is surreal, and it looks great. If you lean into the mirror, he leans in with you, and gets uncomfortably close.

Although Batman can't move about an environment freely, two Move controllers double as his left and right hands. As beautifully rendered as Gotham is, immersion is slightly lost when you look at his hands, which are not connected to any limbs, making him a more likely relative to Rayman than Thomas and Martha Wayne. When you look down, you also won't view Batman's body, and instead see a floating utility belt outfitted with batarangs, a scanner, and a grapple gun.

Regardless of the ghostly design, Rocksteady does a decent job with the gameplay, which stems from basic hand movements. Simple gestures are your main form of interaction, like reaching out to press a button or open a drawer. You can also toss a batarang at a stationary target (with the heaviest of auto-targeting applied), or aim the grapple gun at a highlighted spot to reach a new area.

So what is Batman doing in this game? Rocksteady begins this short story (40 minutes to an hour) with a scene we're all familiar with: the death of Bruce Wayne's parents. Through VR, we now see this tragic event unfold through the eyes of young Bruce, who is standing behind his parents as the crime unfolds. Seeing it from this viewpoint is disturbing, but shows how much this gaming medium can amplify the intensity of a particular scene. This moment offers no interaction (other than turning your head), and like a lot of sequences in Batman: Arkham VR, is more of a movie than a game.

After this brief story moment, the game shifts to Wayne Manor, where trusty butler Alfred alerts Bruce that something terrible has happened. Batman is needed, and Bruce must get to the Batcave as quickly as possible. As luck would have it, the piano he is standing beside holds a secret entrance to his crime-fighting lair. To access it, Bruce simply needs to enter a melody on the piano keys to make an elevator appear. At this point, the player needs to reach out and touch the piano (although I banged on it like Animal from *The Muppets*). The elevator appears below you, and descends into the cave, a great moment that shows how VR can bring a fictional world to life. Bruce quickly learns that Robin and Nightwing have gone missing.

After locating Nightwing's tracking beacon, we are whisked away to a crime scene (something that you definitely won't see coming), and Batman needs to search for clues. This short sequence begins with Batman recreating the crime through holograms (much like the technology from Batman: Arkham Knight). All the player has to do is rewind and fast-forward the murder sequence to spot specific things that will reveal a clue leading to the killer. The challenge comes from looking around 360 degrees to see if you are missing anything. When you spot something, simply pause the footage and it will be added to the evidence log. That's all you do here.

Regardless of the light gameplay integration, this sequence shows us just how fun it is to get up close and personal with Batman's friends and villains. You get closer to most of them than you probably ever would want to. These intimate encounters also provide a great look at the artistry and detailing Rocksteady includes in its character models.

The game is gorgeous, and seeing Batman's world from his viewpoint is cool (I can't stress this enough). The game can be completed in one session, and offers little in terms of challenge, which is a bummer because you can see how these gameplay trappings could be used for enemy encounters or more elaborate sequences.

Yes, Batman: Arkham VR smacks of a proof-of-concept demo for VR, but even so, it's a nice treat for Batman fans, and one of those experiences you'll want more of. » **Andrew Reiner**

RIGS: Mechanized Combat League

Not for the weak of stomach

Style 1-Player Shooter (2 to 6-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment
Developer Guerrilla Cambridge **Release** October 13 **Rating** T

7.25

PSVR

Rigs has been a center point of PlayStation VR's lineup of games and its marketing for a few reasons. It's a PlayStation VR exclusive, developer Guerrilla Cambridge has ties to the creators of Killzone and Horizon Zero Dawn, and it represents an online multiplayer experience that would feel different outside of virtual reality. I had some motion-sickness problems, but Rigs has the potential to be PlayStation VR's premiere multiplayer game.

Rigs is a member of the growing subgenre of sports video games that have an unreal slant. It stands alongside games like Rocket League and Videoball by feeling more like a competitive sport than a shooter, despite the presence of exploding mobile mechs (called rigs here) with guns. You play as a rookie pilot in the Rigs sports league, which pits an assortment of bipedal rigs with a range of differing abilities against one another through a number of different game types.

In virtual reality, you control your aim by moving your head, while the left stick on the controller handles movement. You do get the sense you are controlling a big robot, especially when you move your head to your left and right and take a closer look at your guns, or your view is obscured by the machine's shoulder as you try and figure out what's firing at your back. All PlayStation VR games struggle with the headset's reduced screen resolution, and Rigs is no exception. The rigs look nice, however, and even though the gameplay arenas are small, they have a good sense of scale and offer beautiful vistas when the action slows down enough for you to take a look.

When you start Rigs, a big disclaimer appears announcing it is meant to be played in short bursts, at least initially, and that's advice you should take. I slowly built up a tolerance to Rigs' fast-paced action, but my first few matches left me feeling ill. It does its best to help minimize nausea by limiting your field of view when looking around quickly and cutting to black when you get destroyed and eject from your rig, but it's not quite enough. I was typically only able to play a few rounds before needing to take a break. In follow-up sessions I fared better, as I learned what to avoid and how to play smoother, but it takes time. Once you learn how to avoid the nausea, what you are left with is a fun competitive game.

During the match, you can divert power to one of three modes. One mode heals you, one mode speeds you up, and one mode increases your damage output. Each mode is mapped to a face button so switching between them is frequent, and it changes how you approach each encounter. Activate speed to get to the fight, turn up your damage output to take out the competition, and then switch to heal mode (if you won). It keeps things interesting moment-to-moment without over-complicating the core mechanics.

The three match types also do a good job keeping things from feeling repetitive. Team Takedown functions like the standard team deathmatch – you and your team need to blow up the opposition as much as possible. Endzone places a ball in the field, which must be passed through a goal. Powerslam is my favorite. When you perform well in general combat, overdrive is activated, which means your healing, speed, and damage output are all maxed out temporarily. The only way to score a point in Powerslam is to have overdrive activated while leaping through a goal, usually placed in the middle of the field. Each game type is distinct and offers different tactics, and I never found myself dreading one popping up over another while playing through the offline tournaments.

Your main incentive, outside of simply winning, is unlocking new cosmetic gear and rigs. Four main chassis options distinguish the different rig types. They cover the slow but powerful and well-rounded playing methods, but you can also play as a rig that can float above the arena and one capable of double-jumping. Classes add more wrinkles to the chassis options by adding options like leaving a bomb behind when you die, or offering a health boost to your team by getting close to them. Each each rig feels distinct and I enjoyed trying out each chassis and class. I also liked how the rewards system is set up, which allows you to choose what rewards to chase before each match – such as trying to score five melee kills or getting MVP.

Online play works well, despite being at the forefront of a new technology. Matches are easy to find, and I encountered no more lag than the average online shooter. Before each match, you and your team are placed into your rigs by small flying robots. I never got the sense, however, that I was standing in a virtual space with other players, as everyone uses the same canned "Let's do this!" animations.

Rigs offers a mechanically simple, easy to grasp, and fun-to-play digital sports game. The nausea factor, however, absolutely has the potential to deter players. I could feel it in my stomach almost every time I dropped back into the area after being taken out, and though it did get better the more I played (with frequent breaks) it still made me pause and take a deep breath every time I put the headset on.

» Kyle Hilliard

■ **Concept**
Hop into a bipedal robot and try to blow up other bipedal robots in an arena-sports setting

» **Graphics**
PlayStation VR muddies the details, but the rigs look great and hold up to close inspection. The arenas are clean and stylish.

■ **Sound**
The orchestration is reminiscent of the music used in the Marvel superhero films and it helps elevate the action. The announcers and narrators are helpful without being obnoxious.

■ **Playability**
I had to take breaks from Rigs after almost every round as I recovered from motion sickness, but the rigs control well. Sprinting through the arenas and using your vision to aim feels fast and fluid.

■ **Entertainment**
Rigs has motion-sickness issues (which may not be the case for all players) but the core arena game is a lot of fun, which makes this one of PlayStation VR's strong early experiences.

» **Replay Value**
High

Here They Lie

A surreal nightmare

8

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Tangentlemen **Developer** Tangentlemen, SIE Santa Monica Studio **Release** October 13 **Rating** M

PSVR

» Concept
Walk through an oppressively dark world inspired by surrealist cinema

» Graphics
Textures aren't eye-popping, but the environments convey a powerful sense of scale in VR

» Sound
Mostly low tones and orchestral backing. Not outstanding, but it does a good job of creeping you out

» Playability
Your range of activities aren't varied, it's mostly about what you're seeing

» Entertainment
You'll want to see everything the game has to offer, then show your friends to justify the new PlayStation VR you just bought

» Replay Value
Moderately low

Although it sits squarely in the realm of horror, Here They Lie borrows more from narrative games like Firewatch or Gone Home than Resident Evil or Silent Hill. It benefits from that minimalist approach, since the best parts of the game come not from what you're doing, but from exploring a world that's equal parts intriguing, repulsive, surreal, and grim.

Despite being a PlayStation VR exclusive, Here They Lie isn't concerned with showing off the benefits of Sony's new tech. It is not a series of actions designed to show you what the peripheral can do. Instead, it crafts a thoughtful, interesting world without relying on VR to do the heavy lifting. And by not leaning too heavily on the trappings of its platform, Here They Lie makes a strong case for how VR can improve the kinds of experiences we're used to playing.

For one, VR enhances the game's visual splendor. The game may be in black and white, but the contrast between those colors (and the occasional flourish of red or yellow) gives the game a strong tone. The environments are solemn and unsettling, and the PlayStation VR headset works to make them feel more imposing. As you walk around a town full of claustrophobic, rundown alleys that seem to fall on top of each other, being able to look directly up and see how cluttered the skyline is makes them feel more cramped; conversely, when I find myself beneath a slew of expansive, crisscrossing highways, the sense of depth makes me feel that much more alone.

Most environments project a feeling of wistfulness, but a few of them feel oppressive and garish. At one point, I stumble into a red-light district in the middle of an underground city, with all the seedy businesses and activities that entails. Its residents, who wear wolf or pig heads atop soiled tank tops and dresses, don't seem to notice me. As I stumble around, the limited viewing angle of the headset means I keep looking over my shoulder, waiting for the next scare.

Those scares don't come, because that's not what Here They Lie is going for. As you approach the story's climax, the environments clearly signal the coming of the game's most terrifying enemies, and I had plenty of chances to run away from them. There are a few sections where you have to sneak your way around enemies you can't kill, but if you die, the enemy who killed you usually disappears, and you can forge ahead.

So instead of frightening me, Here They Lie consistently left me to fester with my own unease. Instead of a horror film, its best moments channel David Lynch's more surreal works, like Eraserhead and Rabbits – but, y'know, a little more coherent. Some of the later imagery is downright psychedelic. And, like a good Lynch film, that brooding uneasiness stuck with me for longer than a series of jump scares.

As much as I enjoyed wandering around its various locales, Here They Lie's actual narrative isn't as good the one its environments suggest. Throughout my journey, I followed the trail of a woman in a yellow dress, who's introduced as a love interest. The moments you find her feel like they should be important, but the snippets she and your character act out didn't make me feel invested in what is going on. Notes littered throughout the world give the story more presence, but they feel like a set up for a twist that doesn't come. I can infer some of the story from what the notes said, but I don't have a good idea for why I'm exploring these dark paths.

More interesting than the written notes are photos of flowers or train stations that trigger audio snippets, which are less connected to the story but are more in line with the tone of the environments. The dialogue in these snippets sounds more like someone is being interviewed man-on-the-street style than actors delivering lines, but I actually enjoy the looseness of the delivery, since it makes them sound more natural and adds some surreal flavor.

While the story is unfulfilling, the descent into the hellish world of Here They Lie is, on its own, worthwhile. Its dreary, evocative environments, dark tone, and horrific imagery would stand out even outside the realm of VR games. Some of its places, acts, and monsters will stick with me for a while. It creates a strong sense of place, and while I wouldn't say VR is crucial to experience, it definitely amplifies it. I may not fully get what happened during my time with Here They Lie, but I'm more than satisfied (and a little uneasy) with what I saw along the way. » Suriel Vazquez

Until Dawn: Rush Of Blood

You might want to sit down for this

Style 1-Player Shooter **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** Supermassive Games **Release** October 13 **Rating** M

Last year's Until Dawn was a pleasant surprise. It turned the teen slasher horror movie genre into an interactive experience with an impressive amount of character and narrative development. Rush of Blood drops most of those elements (character and story) in order to focus on something almost entirely different for this virtual reality experience: on-rails shooting. Rush of Blood's overlap with the source material is questionable, but the gameplay is fun, and it's a good showcase for PlayStation VR.

In Rush of Blood, you sit in a roller-coaster car with a pair of guns as it moves through seven different tracks. Some take place in familiar locations from Until Dawn, some take place in more abstract locations, but most of them make their way through caves along minecart tracks. Targets are everywhere, and hitting them without missing keeps your multiplier topped off. Things get a little trickier when enemies start showing up, and affords lots of opportunities for intense surprises and jump-scare moments. I particularly enjoyed the final level which veers the farthest into the world of the strange.

Playing with a DualShock 4 controller is an option, but playing with two Move controllers is more fun and effective. Aiming and shooting feels solid and I rarely missed a shot. The guns' consistent accuracy, unfortunately, does involve a little bit of luck. I didn't have to recalibrate often, but uncontrollable factors (like the lighting in your room) can affect your camera's ability to pick up the motion controllers. Actions like holding two guns in opposite directions and quickly looking back and forth to take on attackers from all angles is an empowering experience.

Virtual reality, in general, has not made me feel nauseated, but some of the more intense roller-coaster moments did make my stomach turn in Rush of Blood. Rather than get excited about oncoming hills, I quickly learned to dread them and even resorted to closing my eyes during the steeper declines. This aspect of the game will be different for all players, but thankfully it uses this admittedly intense mechanic sparingly if you happen to react to it as I did.

Rather than continue the story of Until Dawn, or expand it in a substantial way, Rush of Blood borrows the creepy, something-bad-around-every-corner tone. The player, who has no personality beyond the visual appearance of their arms and legs, seems to be visiting some sort of therapist who suddenly turns into a carnival proprietor and serves as your tour guide through the assorted horrific roller-coaster tracks. What's real and what's in your imagination is unclear, which fits the mysterious tone of Until Dawn and makes everything all the more strange. Siblings Hannah, Beth, and Josh Washington are mentioned in passing, but I didn't learn anything new about them by the time I made it to the end. Even though the story isn't the main focus, I still appreciated it, as well as each of the carnival proprietor's prologues and the actor's performance.

Rush of Blood is straightforward in its execution. It's a simple action game that feels like an evolution of the light-gun shooter, but in this early age of virtual reality, it's the right call. Pointing and shooting at scary things on a fun-house roller-coaster might not seem like the right direction for Until Dawn's character-focused storytelling, but for PlayStation VR, it's one of the best ways to get your feet wet, even if it doesn't do anything bold or particularly innovative in the world of game design. » Kyle Hilliard

7

PSVR

» Concept
Use Until Dawn's creepy setting and a tiny bit of its story for a horror experience on rails that does a good job showing off the potential of PlayStation VR

» Graphics
Rush of Blood is comparable to Until Dawn's impressive visuals, but the PlayStation VR's muddied resolution makes it difficult to see all the detail that appears to be there

» Sound
The sound effects and minimal music deliver plenty of jump scares and create an unsettling atmosphere. The only speaking character delivers on the creepy carnival proprietor expertly

» Playability
Aiming, shooting, reloading, and looking around all work well. Playing with a DualShock 4 controller is possible, but the experience is improved by playing with two Move controllers. I rarely had to recalibrate once I got started

» Entertainment
Rush of Blood is an unexpected direction for the follow-up to Until Dawn, but it's a good, straightforward way to kick off PlayStation's virtual reality initiative

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Gears Of War 4

A return to form

9.25

gamerfocus GOLD

Style 1 or 2-Player Action (10-Player Online) **Publisher** Microsoft
Developer The Coalition **Release** October 11 **Rating** M

Xbox One • PC

» Concept
New developer. New heroes. New enemies. The same Gears of War

» Graphics
Heightened weather effects and destruction produce a continual stream of awesome visuals to soak in. The new enemy types are also beautifully animated

» Sound
The "dude-bro" dialogue is subdued and replaced by legitimately humorous banter. The soundtrack is once again thumping, and the satisfying guitar chord is back to signify the conclusion of each combat encounter

» Playability
Seek cover, pop up, and shoot. Gears of War's combat hasn't changed, but the toys you can play with pack more of a punch – which is needed, given how aggressive the enemies are

» Entertainment
The campaign is too familiar at times, but the gameplay is top notch. All multiplayer modes showcase high levels of depth and reasons to come back

» Replay Value
High

Gears of War 4 is every bit as enjoyable as the series' past iterations, but isn't the fresh start you might think it is.

The fourth wall is nearly broken in Gears of War 4's opening moments when a news reporter looks into the camera, and says "We're back." This dialogue is meant to elicit excitement from fans, but is somewhat of a misleading message, since Gears of War 4 is developed by a new studio, introduces new heroes, a new threat, and has consistently been pitched as a "new saga."

Before developer The Coalition shows us how different its vision is, Gears of War 4 begins with a clever playable prologue that walks us through the key battles that shaped Sera and the series.

Through this tightly scripted introduction, The Coalition does a fantastic job of giving players a true sense of closure while establishing the need for the story to head in a different direction. Set 25 years after the Imulsion Countermeasure (which destroyed all of the Locust and Lambent nests), we meet new protagonists JD Fenix, Kait Diaz, and Del Walker on a sunny and colorful hillside. The series' trademark "destroyed beauty" approach to art design is nowhere to be found, it's just beautiful.

The Coalition doubles down on its decision to take Gears of War 4 in a different direction in the first act, which is vibrant, free of blood and guts, and all about the political climate of the world. We learn JD and his crew have shunned the Coalition of Ordered Governments (COG) to live as outsiders.

While old-school weapons like Lancers are still used, the established conflict is man versus machine – JD versus COG robots. The gameplay that stems from this is no different than the Gears of old. The "DeeBee" robots use cover just as effectively as the Locust troops, and a chainsaw can cut through them just as cleanly. They use wonderful new weapons like the Embar, a charge-shot sniper rifle that takes skill to use without it overheating. The robots also change up combat dynamics in interesting ways, and often populate the areas quickly through drop pods that bounce across the terrain like dice rolling across a dealer's table.

JD is the son of Marcus Fenix but is nothing like his father, delivering upbeat sarcasm and wit, even when the odds are stacked against him. DNA testing might show he's actually the son of Uncharted's Nathan Drake, but he fits nicely into this war-torn land, and has a great rapport with his cohorts (both of which can be played in co-op, online or local). At the moment when it seems like their story is about to begin in earnest, it shifts gears.

After a new monster threat called the Swarm emerges, Marcus Fenix is brought back into the fold, and the series' past quickly becomes the present again. For the sake of spoilers, I won't go into the plot too deeply, but the new threat brings Gears of War's gameplay and narrative back to familiar territory. The story quickly transforms into a reunion with the elements that made the series great leading the charge.

Even though the reason for the switch is a bit of a stretch (and an unnecessary one given how great the new foes and story hooks are), The Coalition has fun with it to the benefit of the player, especially with the gameplay, which delivers chapter after chapter of excellent shootouts and destructive set-piece moments. The campaign is snappy in pacing and doesn't feel bloated. Nicely designed boss fights and diversionary gameplay moments hit at the right times to change up the pacing.

The campaign is a fun ride – the series' best since the original Gears of War. That said, the ending doesn't feel like much of a conclusion, and is an abrupt and puzzling sendoff.

The feeling of returning to familiar ground is ever-present in Versus and Horde mode. Neither mode takes many chances, but both are as enjoyable as ever, and the new wrinkles only make them more dynamic. Horde Mode 3.0 is a true test of teamwork against the environment. The combination of DeeBees and Swarm sharing the battlefield requires new types of strategies, something you can prepare for pre-battle through the new class system, which allows players to designate themselves as an engineer, scout, heavy, sniper, or soldier. I like how the classes change up the teamwork dynamic, and help dictate the placement of the base (which is mobile now). To gain an edge in these fights, players can equip new class skill cards (which don't expire and are randomly unlocked through packs).

I had a blast competing in Versus mode, especially in Arms Race, which switches up an entire team's weapon after three kills are achieved collectively. This is one of those rare examples of a multiplayer mode that forces players to use all of the guns, and it ends up being a wonderful and chaotic bloodbath. Another new mode, Dodgeball, is a heated match of back and forth where you have one life, but can be tagged back in if someone on the opposing team dies.

Even with a new studio leading the development charge, Gears of War 4 is a return to form for the series, and is a continual delight, even if it does unnecessarily cling for dear life to the past. » **Andrew Reiner**

Civilization VI

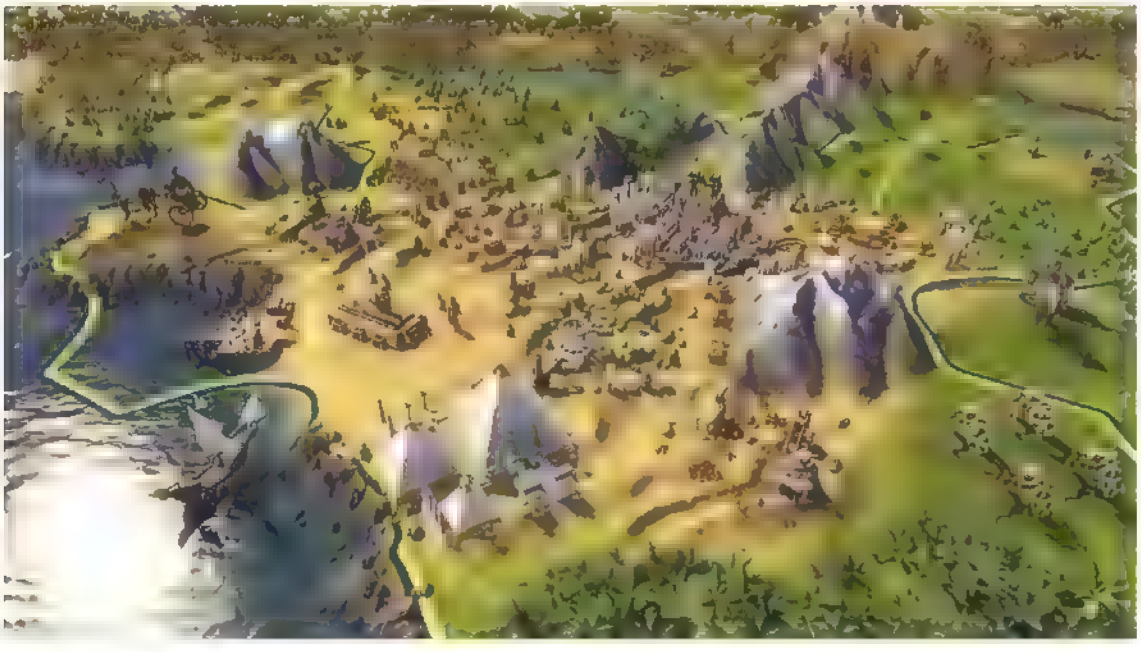
So many countries, so many customizations

gamefan GOLD

Style 1-Player Strategy (8-Player Online) **Publisher** 2K Games
Developer Firaxis Games **Release** October 21 **Rating** E10+

9.5

PC



Nearly every aspect of our lives is built on thousands of years of human ingenuity. Even mundane modern technologies like toasters are only possible thanks to generations of invention. This reality is incredibly apparent while playing Civilization VI, a game built on top of its own ingenuous legacy. Civilization VI is a Swiss watch of complexity. Every element of Firaxis' newest strategy simulation has been refined to a razor's edge. This complexity might act as a barrier to entry for newcomers, but it also results in one of the most rewarding 4X experiences to date.

From the old-timey map aesthetic to a new civics tree that lets you research governmental policies to its new city districts, nearly every aspect of Civilization VI feels new and fresh. It still feels like a Civilization game, but it has enough features that even series fans might find themselves consulting the built-in Civilopedia. Thankfully, every new element is a welcome change, and these features only enriched my appreciation for the series as a whole.

One of the biggest changes in Civilization VI is how your cities sprawl across the globe, creating massive urban jungles. Districts and wonders now take up whole tiles on the board, so your cities become more visually interesting and are almost as fun to plan and design as the municipalities in dedicated city builders. Each tile provides its own benefits and resources, which allows for complex strategies. City-building never feels like a chore and remains consistently exciting during every era of the game.

Since Civilization VI's tiles are randomized, and the benefits of some resources aren't felt until the Renaissance or Atomic ages, you have to become an urban city planner who can plot out the development of a metropolis across thousands of years. Unfortunately, this kind of foresight is rare on your first playthrough. Thankfully, you never work yourself into a corner in Civilization VI; different buildings, wonders, and technologies give you different boosts to your scientific endeavors, religious fervor, or artistic merits, so you always feel like you're trying to pick the best of several beneficial urban projects. I loved the freedom of being able to design my cities however I wanted as I pursued victory by a number of equally viable paths.

Whether you're waging wars or signing peace treaties, Civilization VI is incredibly well-paced. The addictive, "just one more round" nature of Civilization has been amplified thanks to Eureka moments – a series of miniature missions that tie into the tech and civics trees. Each new technology and civic has a task which, once completed, cuts the development time for the associated research item in half. I hadn't even been using spearmen, but when I saw that killing a few enemy units with spearmen would boost my military tactics technology and allow me to build more powerful berserker units, I put a spear through the nearest barbarian camp. The technology and civics trees also sometimes feed into each other; I rushed to build the feudalism civic so I could get a boost to my stirrup technology, allowing me to train knights. Thanks to these Eureka moments, I always found something exciting to strive after each round, and never felt the urge to spam the end turn button in order to get to the end of the game.

Civilization VI is so deep that it also includes dozens of other little improvements. For example, each civilization leader has their own revealed and hidden agendas, which influence your diplomatic negotiations. Workers have been replaced with a builder class, which has a limited number of uses, but completes upgrades to your cities instantly. Roads are now built automatically as soon as you establish a trade route. These are just a few of the dozens of minor tweaks to what was already an incredibly strong formula. Firaxis' newest entry in the Civilization series isn't a game-changer, because the game was already great. However, Civilization VI could easily be the pinnacle of the series. » **Ben Reeves**

» **Concept**
Start with a scrappy band of explorers and grow into the mightiest nation in the world

» **Graphics**
This entry moves away from the more realistic tone of Civilization V and towards a more exaggerated design, but I love the old-world map aesthetic

» **Sound**
Sean Bean does a killer job narrating your every achievement, but the music is a far cry from the glory of previous entries

» **Playability**
The strategies around building your empire are nearly limitless, but with so many moving parts, Civilization VI presents a steep learning curve for newcomers

» **Entertainment**
Civilization remains as addictive as ever. As soon as you start building your empire, say goodbye to your weekend

» **Replay Value**
High

Paper Mario: Color Splash

Coloring inside the lines

8.25

Style 1-Player Action/Adventure **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Intelligent Systems **Release** October 7 **Rating** E

» Concept
Paper Mario is back on consoles, but this entry follows in the footsteps of its 3DS predecessor Sticker Star

» Graphics
Color Splash's papercraft world is a visual treat. Every inch of these environments looks as if they tumbled out of an art supply store

» Sound
The soundtrack is loaded with sunny tunes and lighthearted sound effects. If you've ever played a Mario game before you can probably imagine what Color Splash sounds like

» Playability
The battle system is easy to learn, but all of Mario's attacks are based on a limited supply of attack cards, which might turn off some traditionalists

» Entertainment
Charming characters and zany events fill the world, which is good because you traverse the same locales multiple times

» Replay Value
Moderate

Nintendo's Paper Mario and Mario & Luigi series are both rooted in the original Super Mario RPG. However, while the Mario & Luigi games have clung to traditional RPG mechanics like experience points and upgradable equipment, Paper Mario has strayed from that foundation. Color Splash is almost unrecognizable as an RPG, but it is still a delightfully humorous journey through the Mushroom Kingdom sure to please series fans and newcomers.

Color Splash begins with Mario traveling to the exotic isle of Port Prisma, where he discovers that Bowser has mustered an army of Shy Guys with straws to suck the color out of this vibrant papercraft world. Mario partners with an anthropomorphic paint can who fills Mario's iconic mallet with paint, and our hero begins hammering the paint back into the world. Throw in a princess kidnapping and several collectible stars and you have a classic Mario story. More than anything, Color Splash is a testament to the skill of Nintendo's localization team, which has masterfully taken a series of bizarre situations and filled the game with clever belly-laugh moments.

As Mario continues to explore Port Prisma's island and bring color back to the world, he discovers several reasons to use his hammer for less artistic means: smashing fools over the head. Those who played Paper Mario: Sticker Star will already be familiar with Color Splash's combat system. However, Mario now collects cards instead of stickers, which allow him to jump on his enemies' heads, hammer foes into each other, or even summon friendly minions into battle.

Mario's attacks are as diverse as his foes, some of whom evade ground attacks or can't be jumped on. I enjoyed the simple strategies of powering up my cards by painting them, and figuring out the right cards to use in each battle so I never exhausted my deck. Some players might be turned off by the fact that Mario's attacks are a finite resource, but I found it easy to acquire new cards by painting the environment, and the few times I did run out of attack cards during a battle, I easily got a random new one for a paltry 10 coins.

Though the combat is fun, I miss the RPG mechanics from earlier Paper Mario games, since Color Splash never has you sorting through an inventory or managing character stats. Since Mario also doesn't gain experience in battle, the only meaningful combat rewards are collectable hammers that increase your paint reserves, allowing you to paint more objects in the environment. The lack of character growth made combat feel more simplistic, and I felt aimless with few far-reaching character goals.

This lack of growth means that battles can feel superfluous. More than once, I was tempted to run from combat. However, most random encounters are over quickly, so this isn't a big problem. I also found it easy to avoid battles by dodging onscreen enemies, and Mario can instantly destroy weaker foes, which allowed me to skip some battles entirely.

The one thing in Color Splash I never skipped was the dialogue, which is consistently funny. Each level has Mario embarking on a new comical adventure that lets players explore everything from resort beaches to giant-filled forests. I laughed heartily as Mario helped a group of ghosts throw a tea party. I giggled immaturely as Mario assisted a superheroic Toad in finding his underpants. I cackled maniacally as Mario laid waste to an entire army of Shy Guys with a star during a Coliseum battle royale. These memorable moments are scattered throughout, and easily make this one of the funniest Mario games to date.

Color Splash's RPG elements might be paper-thin, but fans of the series won't be disappointed with this latest adventure. While the game's combat isn't much deeper than Mario's paper body, this plumber's antics and colorful world are worth the price of admission. » Ben Reeves

Yo-kai Watch 2: Bony Spirits & Fleshy Souls

Subpar spiritual successor

Style 1-Player Role-Playing (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Level-5 **Release** September 30 **Rating** E10+

A year after Yo-kai's North American debut, the franchise has not made a substantial impact on our culture. The accompanying anime is now available to watch on Netflix, two free-to-play mobile Yo-kai puzzle games have released, and the core 3DS game has had a year to attract new fans. The response has been tepid overall, but that hasn't stopped Yo-kai Watch 2 (which released in Japan in 2014) from being localized for North America. The sequel has not invigorated my appreciation for this young franchise, but it continues to be a worthy and distinct Pokémon competitor.

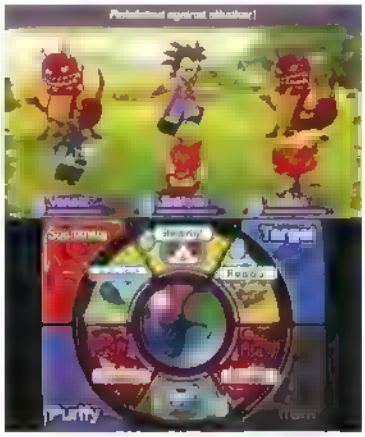
The core game remains mostly unchanged from the original. You are a child gifted with the magical Yo-kai Watch, which allows you to see ghosts others can't. Often, these ghosts cause unseen emotional distress to those around them, and you have to convince them to leave by talking to them or telling the Yo-kai already on your team to fight them for you. You also run into Yo-kai while exploring the world, but the wild ones only respond to fighting. After you exchange punches, some of them decide to become your friend. The friendship mechanic is interesting, because you add Yo-kai to your team without having to expend inventory items.

You take a group of six Yo-kai into each battle, and they do their standard attacks without your input. Their arrangement factors into how well they fight, and you can direct them to attack specific enemies or to the weak spots of larger enemies. Over time, they charge up and you activate their special move with a minigame. I enjoyed the combat in the previous game, and it hasn't changed much for the sequel. I wish the minigames had more variety, but I like how the Yo-kai handle themselves while you take care of other tasks. The boss fights are highlights, as they often force you to think outside of your standard combat tactics and seek out weak spots and attack in the right order.

Later, you unlock the new Model Zero watch that essentially lets you hit harder, but at a higher cost requiring a longer recharge. It doesn't change combat dramatically, but being able to switch between watches mid-fight for a Hail Mary attack is a nice optional wrinkle.

Yo-kai's story is not its strong suit, though the world and its characters have a strange sense of humor. I wouldn't say Yo-kai is funny, but it has a levity I appreciate, especially when compared to the often heavy-handed narratives of Pokémon. The story usually goes for the joke at the expense of meaningful character development or plot, and the result is a directionless narrative whose true antagonist makes a late appearance. I never had a sense I was building towards a finale so much as I was just wandering around the town doing endless fetch-quests for the humans and Yo-kai that I made the mistake of talking to.

The map system for the original Yo-kai was a disaster, with few markings and no way to divert your focus and direction marker away from the main story, despite an ever-growing list of sidequests. Now the map



is well-marked, and you can now choose what missions to focus on, making it much more fun to tackle multiple quests at once. Fast-travel is a much-needed option made available too late. Progress is mostly directed by fetch quests, so the resulting need to move back and forth between towns (often by riding a real-time train) is incredibly tedious. Even after unlocking a number of fast-travel markers, my follow arrow still tried to make me take the longer route, which I was happy to finally bypass.

The map changes are great, but the other aspects feel like modified retreads of the first game. Even with the story's interesting attempts to look at the origin of the Yo-kai Watch, it plods along without ever rising up to something worth seeing to the end. Yo-kai Watch 2 still stands as a worthwhile Pokémon competitor, but its forward progression is only happening in small steps. » **Kyle Hilliard**

7

» Concept
Explore an open city and its neighboring towns to fight and capture ghosts again

» Graphics
I appreciate how bizarre and sometimes creepy the Yo-kai designs are, though the general visual style is typical anime

» Sound
The limited voice acting is as good as the accompanying anime thanks to consistent actors. The soundtrack has some memorable themes that define the bizarre world

» Playability
Switching between button and stylus control remains a nuisance, but character movement and combat both feel great

» Entertainment
This sequel has some much-needed improvements over the first game, but the pacing feels more sluggish

» Replay Value
Moderately high

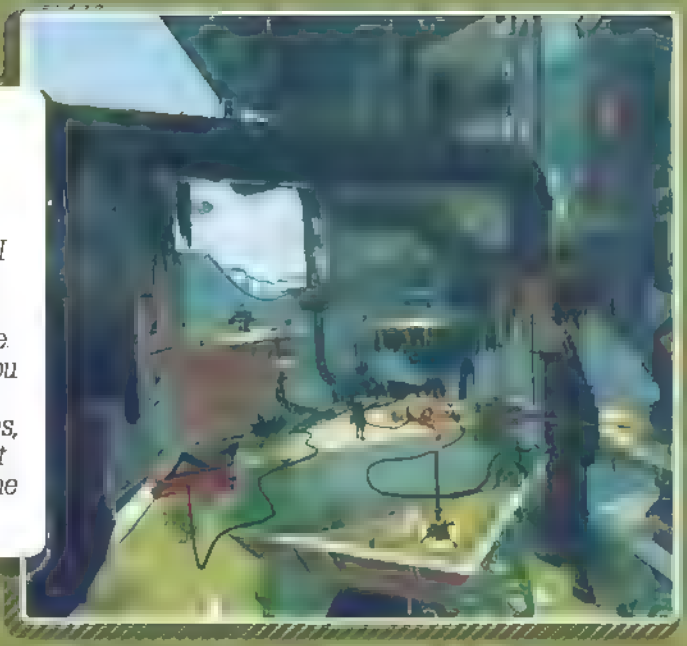
Bony Sprits Or Fleshy Souls?

Much like the Pokémon games that Yo-kai Watch draws much of its inspiration from, the differences between the two versions of Yo-kai Watch 2 are minor. Each version has a handful of exclusive Yo-kai (like Venoct in Bony Spirits and Kyubi in Fleshy Souls), and the retail versions include different exclusive Soultimate moves for Jibanyan. The main game and its story, however, is basically the same between the two games.

6.5 | Wayward Sky

Platform PSVR **Release** October 10 **Rating** T

Wayward Sky is an entertaining adventure that never quite takes off. I enjoyed exploring the environments, but it doesn't build on its delightfully charming world to make it memorable. It's a good showcase for VR, where you feel immersed in its universe as you take control of several quirky machines, but the alluring concept falls flat as it never manages to be as intuitive as the world it presents. – Elise Favis



5.75 Thumper

Platform PSVR, PS4 **Release** October 10 **Rating** E10+

Thumper is a rhythm game stripped down to the rims – a primal, uncomfortable nightmare by design. Though it shares a few DNA strands with other games out there, Thumper is its own unique beast – a mean, unrelenting animal that I wanted to put down after a few hours. – Jeff Cork

6.5 King's Quest – Chapter 4: Snow Place Like Home

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360, PC **Release** September 27 **Rating** E10+

King Graham's tale takes another dark turn, covering his infant son's kidnapping and the strain that comes when they're reunited nearly two decades later. It's interesting material to cover, but the tedious and uninspired block puzzles are an anchor that yanks the rest of the game down. – Jeff Cork

7 | Wheels Of Aurelia

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC **Release** September 20 (PC), October 4 (PS4, Xbox One) **Rating** T

Wheels of Aurelia effectively constructs a unique setting in 1970s Italy, but as often as it imagines a world where its characters are free to drive where they want, it skims over the details. Those omissions jolt me out of Wheels of Aurelia's daydream into a far more mundane drive down the same roads again. – Suriel Vazquez

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Picking Favorites

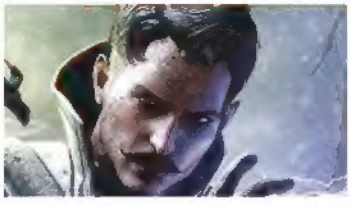
BioWare creators dish on their beloved characters

Making a game designer pick a standout character from their past creations is like asking a parent which child is their favorite. The answers were not pried away easily, but after being put on the spot, BioWare creators past and present shared their most memorable player characters from the studios' rich 21-year lineage.

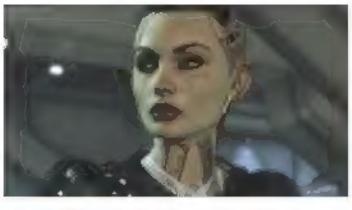
by Matt Bertz

Ray Muzyka: I'd say Minsc and HK-47. I liked Minsc mainly because of his wacky humor, plus as a bonus, one of his quick slots was occupied by his hamster, Boo, and when you clicked on him it went "squeee." With HK-47, everything he said it was like "Did he really just say that?"

Greg Zeschuk: For me it's Mordin Solus, as he was always entertaining and good for a laugh. When Mordin Solus actually broke out in song that one time, I was floored. I also have a soft spot for Viconia as she was my first video game romance.

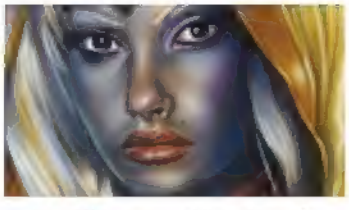


Mark Darrah: I'm tempted to go with Dorian because I feel like his personal story in Inquisition is the most we really got with storytelling on that sort of smaller, big things caused by smaller things aspect.

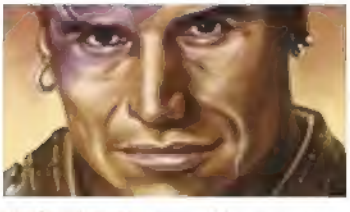


Aaryn Flynn: Do I have to give one answer? I'm going to go with Jack from Mass Effect 2. I thought Jack was a great story, and I can remember first seeing the concepts for Jack and my jaw dropping thinking, really?

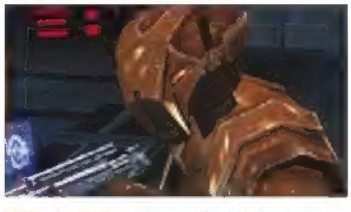
Casey Hudson: I'm going to say Liara. She bears a lot of the storytelling load of Mass Effect, but she's also right there with you through the whole thing as a friend, and then she's a romance interest.



James Ohlen: I would say Viconia, because she was the romance in Baldur's Gate II and she was by far the most popular.



Kevin Martens: If I had to pick one it would be Minsc, who was written by Lukas Kristjanson. He was the original writer for BioWare. He's still there. He's got my favorite sense of humor, and Minsc and his wacky out-of-left-field way is classic Luke.



Mike Laidlaw: I'm going to have to go with HK-47. Where C-3PO reacted to humans with passive-aggressive bulls---, HK-47 wore it entirely on his sleeve. "I have immense amounts of contempt for you and would murder you, except you I like a little more than the others."

Preston Watamaniuk: I liked Wrex because he was probably one of the characters you had the most complicated relationship with and there was the most sort of actionable choice around Wrex throughout the entire trilogy.

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